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Welcome



NOW PLAYING...

Captain Sonar

Welcome to a somewhat computer generated version of Tabletop Gaming. We're looking at AI art this issue, and whether it has a place in analogue games. For many it's been a fun toy to create artwork with, for others it's a disability aid. Aside from it's utility, there's ethical concern about how the data for the learning model is acquired, and what it means for human artists. We speak to several game designers, writers and artists about their experiences with this powerful new tool.

Beyond that we have the biggest game review of the year: *Frosthaven*. Is it any good? Does it stand up to scrutiny for every extra kilo on the original? We hope so, but you'll have to flick to the played section to find out. We've also taken a look at last month's massive *Time of Empires* and the new, contained, ghost-busting version of *Carcassonne* in *Mists Over Carcassonne*.

And there's also *The Doomed* – an exercise in kitbash-ing and game design vandalism ('take bits off until it's fun') that will lead us to whatever awaits us beyond this month's pages.

Next month we've got an exciting surprise for you all – a bunch of new features, and a new look. Keep your eyes peeled for issue 77 of Tabletop Gaming magazine, your ultimate guide to gaming.

Christopher John Eggett Editor

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QUICKSTART

“Craftsmanship and the human touch are going to be valued forever...”



Sean Aaberg on AI Artwork for games, p20 ➤

“Desperate for indoor hobbies, I returned to miniatures, gluing guns to knights, swords to robots, claws to everything...”



Chris McDowall on *The Doomed*, p34 ➤

“Dress inappropriately, flirt outrageously in public, get caught with members of the opposite sex...”



Lynne Hardy on how to ruin your reputation in *Regency Cthulhu*, p40 ➤



In this issue

06 AT A GLANCE

09 CARDBOARD MANIFESTO

10 TEN OF THE BEST

Card games for 2023

13 ROLE CALL

14 HAVE YOU PLAYED?

Your new favourite roleplaying game,
Tunnel Goons

16 THE SOLOIST

We're making a map

19 MY FAVOURITE GAME

Chris Bissette offers us a scoop of *The Vanilla Game*

ON THE COVER!

20 IS AI ART CHANGING GAMING FOREVER?

How will AI generated artwork impact our hobby?

29 AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 PLAYS

We're off to Belgium

30 OUT OF THE BOX

Our round up of the best non-game gaming stuff!

33 LUDOLOGICAL LAMENTATIONS

We ask our agony aunt Ben Maddox whether we can just learn as we go...

34 THE DOOMED

Chris McDowall chats about his new kitbashed skirmish game

38 WHAT'S IN A GAME?

Should we pass go?

40 REGENCY CTHULHU

Jane Austen meets cosmic horror

46 UNDERMINED

We go searching for gold in them there hills

53 PLAYED

Looking for your next game?
Then read on...

87 PAINTING GUIDE

In our last painting guide for the magazine, we offer up a Star Wars spin off guide

94 DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

Tips for new GMs

96 SHOP SPOTLIGHT

98 TABLETOP TIME MACHINE

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE UP TO 10%. PLUS RECEIVE EXCLUSIVE BENEFITS See page 8 for more details



THE GAMES

Lorcana	10
Magic The Gathering	10
Pokemon	10
Netrunner	10
Flesh & Blood	10
Castle Panic	10
Into The Odd	34
The Doomed	34
Dungeons & Dragons	94
Go	38
Dungeon Degenerates	20
MÖRK BORG	20
Trokia	20
Call of Cthulhu	40
Troyes	6
Miru	16
Liminal_	16
Tunnel Goons	14
Longboard	76
Frosthaven	54
Gloomhaven	54
Beer & Bread	62
Everybody Wins	58
Basilica	78
Star Wars	87
The Mandalorian	87
Carcassonne	84

AT A GLANCE

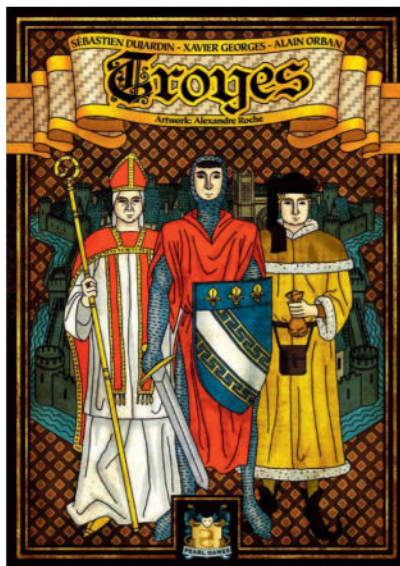
TROYES CREATORS PEARL GAMES CLOSED AS INTERNAL STUDIO BY ASMDEE

In extremely sad news this morning Pearl Games have announced that they are being closed as an internal Asmodee Studio. In a statement released on their website by Sébastien Dujardin, one of the games' companies founders, the news of the studios closure was relayed as well as three layoffs – including Dujardin.

The company is best known for *Troyes*, *The Bloody Inn* and *Tournay* as well as a host of other titles. *Troyes* is the title that kickstarted the company in 2010, which was purchased by the French Asmodee group. They've published 11 games in 13 years, and the conversion from an independent studio to an internal Asmodee one was originally seen as a sign of long term growth and stability.

Their most recent, and final release (for now) is *Time of Empires* reviewed page 60 – it might be a good idea if you have any interest in the game to snap up a copy now before any threats of it going out of print loom in the future.

The company will close officially at the end of March. Dujardin commented that he is making arrangements to retain the brand and



catalogue of Pearl Games moving forward. Which means the company may not quite be dead, but is likely to enter a much slower publishing cycle.

SURPRISE: STONEMAIER GAMES DROPS A NEW SCYTHE TITLE

An email offering preorders for the new *Scythe* sequel, *Expeditions* suddenly appeared in people's inboxes on February 1st. The game is a departure from the table hogging original, instead replacing the huge board with a few tiles and a card-driven engine-building. It's set to run 1-5 players and 60-90 minutes at this stage. It is, as the email says, a 'true preorder' in the sense that they've not decided on the full amount to be produced – which means this might be the best chance you have of securing yourself a copy of the title.



KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

5%

The decrease in the Germany hobby games market in 2022 (the first in 80 years, but following a rise of 21% in 2020)

10TH

The next edition of *Warhammer 40,000*, rumoured to be on the horizon...

127

ZineQuest 5 projects live on Kickstarter at the time of writing

7

Lorcana cards revealed, so far for fans to theorize about

48(ish)

hexes to explore in *Isle of Ixx*

tabletop
GAMING

OUR ALL-NEW GAMES STORE

DISNEY LORCANA CARD GAME LAUNCH DATE ANNOUNCED AT TOY FAIR 2023



Earlier this month Ravensburger announced the release date for *Lorcana: The First Chapter*, their official Disney trading card game. During our visit to Toy Fair London 2023, we got a sneak peek at the game and the upcoming products in the range.

Disney *Lorcana: The First Chapter* is a battling card game featuring all of your favourite Disney characters, from Mickey to Moana. Each character has been lovingly recreated with brand new original illustrations.

In the UK the first set will launch in friendly local game stores on 18th August with an organised play programme. The full retail launch will come on 1st September.

The current range includes three starter decks of 60 cards in mixed 'inks' – the coloured card types (Amber, Amethyst, Emerald, Ruby, Steel and Sapphire). Booster packs will contain 12 card with two rare-or-better cards and one foil card. An 'Illumineer's Trove' works as an intro pack for big fans with two deck boxes, eight boosters and a player's guide. Gift sets include classic oversized foil cards – likely to be highly collectable.

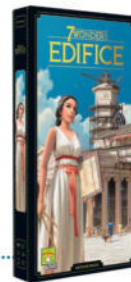
From what we can tell from the publicly released information about the game there will be cases where players 'shift' their characters by playing others on top – powering them up into different forms. The main thing to take from this is that if you're someone with Disney loving children, cohabiting with a 'Disney Adult', or know someone with a reckless desire to play more TCGs – then it's probably time to starting saving up for August.



7 WONDERS GETS A NEW EXPANSION: EDIFICE

Repose productions has announced another *7 Wonders* expansion called *Edifice*. While there's already a handful of expansions for the core *7 Wonders* game, let alone the spin-off titles of *Duel* (the head to head version) and *Architects* (slightly lighter than the original). Previously we've enjoyed *Armada*, *Leaders* and *Babel* – plus a bunch of fan made expansions.

Edifice looks to be a simple to set-up with the addition of collaboration being the name of the game. Players can work on communal projects together to earn end-of age bonuses if the edifice is completed – or they can decide to go it alone. This should had a tasty social twist to the classic family game. The game offers 15 new edifice cards for the world's 'most awarded' game (with 33 titles to its name).



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We asked...

This month we asked: what is the greatest board game accessory that you own?

You said...

Friends to play with!

@GeanaWQ

The Carcassonne catapult, without a doubt

@pangalactic

A Kallax shelving unit. Actually several Kallax shelving units.

@JamesWallis

Mini white board for notable rules!

@bushontheradio

A huge table

@CharlieTheel

My odd, odd brain

@EscapadesR

A dice tray

@D20FutureShow

A dining table. Mrs L insists it's for dining, but that seems like such a waste.

@aLostVictorian

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CARDBOARD MANIFESTO

THE APP'S ALRIGHT

We argue that app-enabled games have come of age, and are ready to make your games more enjoyable – rather than getting in the way

Words by Christopher John Eggett

There's an app for that. For some, these are chilling words when said in reference to a board game. It's fair to say we don't get into this hobby to look at another screen. There's probably too many of those around you already, you may well look at one – in one form or another – all day in your day job. So why would I suggest that, right now, we're entering a golden age of app-enabled games? Isn't it antithetical to the spirit of the hobby? Should we not retreat to the den*, games room, or kitchen table without the sight or sound of an internet-connected device around?

Maybe! You can still do that. But right now there's a few games that might just change your mind about how we use our phones, tablets and tech for good around the gaming table.

What spurred this idea on was the recent release of *Time of Empires* (a game I love, which is reviewed on page 60 of this magazine). It's a real-time civilization building game, and its use of the app that comes with it is simple, unobtrusive, and not something

you'd quite be able to replicate smoothly within the flow of the game using cardboard. The app offers a soundtrack to the game (a pretty so-so use, I'll grant) and a timer (which of course, we know can be replicated otherwise) – but also makes the sound of a baby crying. This last part, aside from giving those of us with children a pause to listen as to whether it was *our* child, is the trigger to make 'scholars' a kind of unit in the game used to influence leaders and build wonders. Every time this happens – often midway through calculating your next speedy move – and causes everyone around the table to suddenly create the scholar tokens, usually saying 'scholars!' like they've just remembered something they were supposed to have already done. It's a very silly, but dramatic moment in the game which couldn't be replicated by flipping a card and having everyone read it. It

turns the whole experience into party game of sorts, and with that lifts the whole experience

out of the frantic and fuzzy strategy that the game gives players the rest of the time.

Equally, the new *Mothership* app is a simple character tracker and generator. In a game where, yes, you do probably look at screens in the in-world fiction more than others, it makes sense that your vital signs are on a heads-up display (even if that's really an in-pocket-diplay). Or *Achroma*, a battling card game where players develop their board up to create a kind of passive damage tableau. Here players use their phones to do all the boring stuff like tracking your decks and so on, but more than that, player link their phones during battle. This makes the process of doing damage to each side, and tracking it, a breeze. It works out how the 'life steal' mechanic works for you, and it'll record the winners.

While I loved *Descent: Legends of the Dark* for its ability to get out of the way of the physical tactics of the game and to do percentile damage improvements like a videogame, it still demanded too much time was spent focused on a tablet. Its problem wasn't that it's on a tablet, but that, like a game that wants you to read a bad fantasy novel from a series of small cards, it demanded you sit there through the cutscenes. It was undeniably part of the experience, but

these more recent outing – focusing on utility and a sense of fun that gets out of the way of the actual game you've got your actual hands on, are the way forward.

So, the next time you're in a games shop looking at a game box – only to discover there's an app. Give it a chance, it might be one of the good ones. 🍀

* Not sure people have these any more.



1 LORCANA

A Disney trading card game created by Ravensburger? Sign me up. While little is (publicly) known about the game, what we have seen so far shows that this is a very serious challenge to both *Pokémon* and *Magic: The Gathering*.

Speculation about how the game plays had led us to believe there will be some clever ways of powering up your princesses and building high-synergy decks. Plus the artwork has been reimagined in a big way, making these deeply collectable as well as playable.

This is a serious contender from a couple of big names – keep your ear out for people very sincerely saying things like “the Micky meta” in the future. Launch is scheduled for August.



2 NETRUNNER

It's a comeback kind of year. *Netrunner* has been revitalised this year following on from it's very sad and abrupt death in 2018. Null Signal Games are the team behind it and as we looked at last issue.

We think 2023 could be a good year for people to get back into this much loved card game with all new sets and artwork. Whether you're an old school player, or just looking to find out what the

hype is all about, now's the time to jump into *Netrunner*.



10 OF THE BEST CARD GAMES OF 2023

2023 looks to be a big year for card games, wether they're collectable, living or trading. Here's our top picks for card games that are going to make waves in 2023.

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**



3 MAGIC: THE GATHERING

An oldie but a goodie – *Magic* feels like a game that's really hit its stride over the last few years. Recent releases like the *Brother's War* and the upcoming *Phyrexia* show that there's life in the grandfather of the genre yet. Plus, the *Warhammer 40,000* crossover cards also show that there's still room for Wizards of the Coast to have fun with their core products. If you've never played Magic before we recommend grabbing the new *Jumpstart* sets, or grabbing a load of new pack and playing the slightly odd format *Wizad's Tower*.

4 POKÉMON TRADING CARD GAME

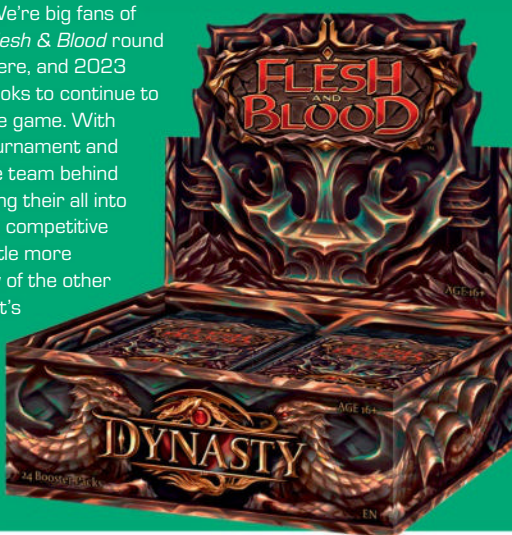
With the demise of the Pokémon TCG Online app announced this month, we can only expect that further investment into the lucrative (for the publisher) physical card game is on the horizon. 2023 is a great year for getting into *Pokémon* as we're past the 25th Anniversary hype, so you can actually get hold of the cards without having to physically fight a YouTuber at the supermarket.



5 FLESH & BLOOD

We're big fans of *Flesh & Blood* round here, and 2023 looks to continue to

be a big year for the game. With a huge focus on tournament and local match-ups the team behind the game are putting their all into making this the top competitive TCG. While it's a little more complex than a few of the other games on this list, it's a great one for those who value depth – as well as cash prizes.



6 MARVEL CHAMPIONS

This game can simply not be stopped. Every

time you even so much as glance at any news about *Marvel Champions*, a whole new set of heroes, scenarios and packs are released. Did I know that I needed a 78-card scenario pack based around Mojo – the bad guy that basically traps you inside their own sick TV show? Not until I the exact first moment I saw it. It's like being offered to play out your favourite parts of not only the movies, but the comics and even those slightly janky cartoon series.



7 DIGIMON: THE CARD GAME

With new sets coming this year

it's a great time to double-down on Digimon. The innovative and swifty system allows for big plays straight out of the gate – forcing players to be wildly inventive with their deck construction. On top of all that, it's got some of the most bonkers artwork in the entire trading card space. It's up there with *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in terms of wackiness, and built on top of a much easier to learn game.



8 BATTLE SPIRITS

Launching in English later this year, *Battle Spirits*

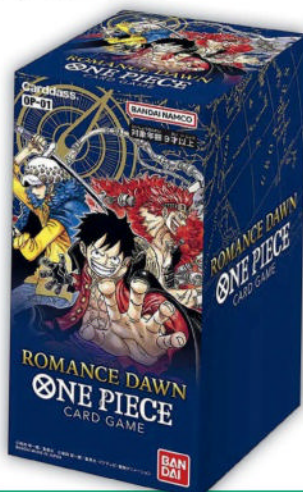
looks to be a really serious attempt at running with the main players from Bandai. This runs on a 'core' system which is both your health and your card-playing resource so offers up crazy risk/reward plays. The artwork is of course beautiful and should scratch and itch for those of you looking for a more 'grown up' TCG to play that you can get in on the ground floor of.



9 ONE PIECE

If you're an anime and manga nerd

however, there's only one choice for the card game that's going to theme your year, and that's *One Piece*. Based on 25-plus years of the manga and anime this game allows you to live out your favourite conflicts from within that universe. One for the fans, and those who just want something really quite bonkers.



10 KEYFORGE

With Ghost Galaxy picking up the reigns on this massive TCG that stopped abruptly

when the computer said 'no' a couple of years ago, we hope to see it make a return in 2023. For those who have missed out, *Keyforge* gives you complete decks that are randomised. These work straight out of the pack with no deck construction at all. The gameplay is fast, and as there's no 'mana' system, you can just play cards of a single 'house' on any given turn to gather the game-winning resource. They've already released "adventures" for the game. Keep an eye out, as it might be time to dive back in.



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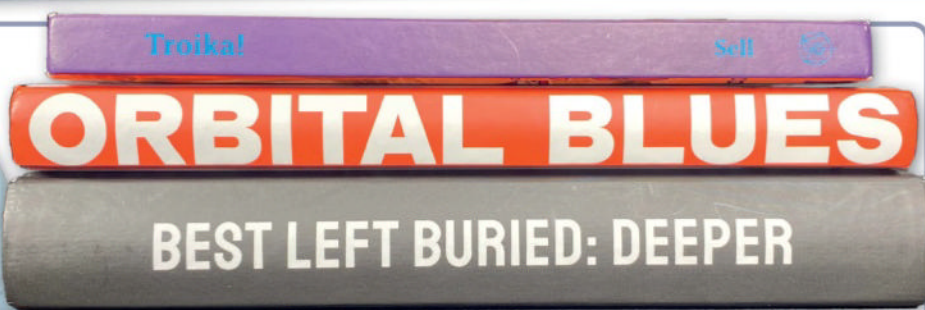
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FIND OUT MORE HERE:

www.ttgami.ng/indie-rpg-book-club

Role Call

In this month's **ROLE CALL** we're all about the smash-and-grab, from heists and cool shades through to Viking raids

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**



AGE OF SIGMAR: SOULBOUND - CHAMPIONS OF DESTRUCTION

We've already had *Soulbound* sourcebooks for all those tedious undead and chaotic sorts, pursuing evil for the same of some nebulous goal or devious ideal. Now, this new tome finally adds options for playing out a campaign where smashing the world is more than just a means to an end.

Cubicle 7 | £27



CYBERPUNK RED: BLACK CHROME

What's the most important bit of kit you need to survive on the mean streets of Night City? That's right – really, really cool clothing. This in-world gear book sets out a whole load of guns, armour, mods and outfits for your 'punks to pick up and put on.

R. Talsorian Games | £30



SPIRE: SIN

This new sourcebook for one of the best indie RPGs of recent years, *SIN* looks to introduce a bit of law and order – as well as the deliberate absence thereof – to the dingy streets of *Spire*. This includes a pair of new classes, as well as a trio of ready-to-run scenarios.

Rowan, Rook and Decard | £32



D&D: KEYS FROM THE GOLDEN VAULT

Pulling off a great heist can be the focus on an entire campaign. In *Keys From the Golden Vault*, you have 13 of them. This latest anthology for *D&D 5E* is packed with one-off heists that can either be played as one-shots, or linked together to form a single, lengthy campaign.

Wizard of the Coast | £36



RAIDERS OF THE SERPENT SEA

Coming from the team behind the excellent *Odyssey of the Dragonlords*, this new campaign looks to introduce Norse mythology into the gameplay of *D&D 5E*. The hefty 500-page campaign guide includes expanded sailing rules, new epic backgrounds, more than 25 Norse-inspired monsters, and dozens of new magic items.

Modiphius | £20

HAVE YOU PLAYED?

TUNNEL GOONS

One of the lightest, silliest roleplaying games ever deserves your attention.
Meet Tunnel Goons, your new favourite RPG

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

Tunnel Goons is, for my money, one of the best roleplaying games in the world. It's simple, it's elegant, it's fraught with danger. It's also designed in a way that it plays extremely quickly and lightly. You can play nearly any adventure with it, and the modules that have been written for it specifically contain a perfect kind of whimsy and silliness that should disarm nearly anyone at the gaming table.

Designed by the prolific Nate Treme of Highland Paranormal Society, its charming system lets the adventures you use it with become dangerous episodes of slapstick, madcap hijinks. And it's great for kids too. If you hadn't guessed. Plus, because Nate is also the graphic designer for many of the adventures for the game, there's a very satisfying 'complete' feeling to every one of the 'official' adventures for it.

Shall we go check out what's goofing around in those tunnels then?

WHAT IS IT?

Roleplaying games should be easy. You shouldn't need to overthink it and you shouldn't need to worry about script, wardrobe or lighting. It's not an actual play series, it's you and your friends trying to steal some treasure (probably). *Tunnel Goons* is the quickest way to have daft fun.

If you're someone who is put off by 'learning something that isn't *Dungeons & Dragons*' then you're in luck – the rules for *Tunnel Goons* are four pages long. That's including a character sheet and a cover. It's totally free. There are free adventures for it everywhere. You can play it with almost anyone. You need two six-sided dice and a dream. Everything else is just frills.

Here's how it works:

Tunnel Goons uses three stats 'Brute' (strength), 'Skulker' (sneaky dexterity stuff), 'Erudite' (thinky stuff) which apply to each situation as per the whims of the GM and those around the table. The GM describes the world, and players interact with it

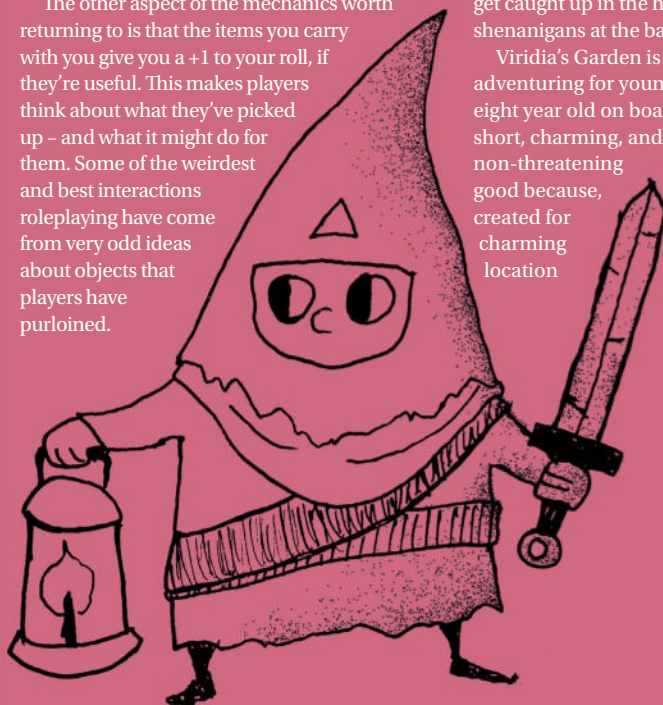


by describing their actions – as with any roleplaying game. The GM might call for a test in one of your skills if you do something exciting, difficult or dangerous. Players then try and beat a difficulty score (DS) by rolling two six-sided dice, add the points from the relevant skill and any items they happen to be carrying that are useful. If they equal or beat the DS, they succeed.

In combat or dangerous situations is where the game really sings. The same process applies, you roll two six-sided dice, trying to be a DS score for the monster, enemy, slug barkeep or whoever has drawn your ire. The difference between the DS and the number rolled is the damage done – and this works both ways. Roll an eight against a DS of six? You’ve just done two damage to that character. You rolled a six against a DS of 10? That’s four damage to you. The cool thing here isn’t just that razor-edged single roll for your combat – which is quick, speeds up combat, and makes everything super deadly – but that when you bash a monster for two damage, it’s DS decreases by that too. So that goblin you just whacked around the head with its own mallet is now easier to hit. Which, I think, is probably more realistic than the classic ‘perfectly healthy until zero health’ model that we see as default elsewhere.

Not that we’re looking for realism of course. This is about silly, collaborative fun that usually revolves around trying to get some treasure from somewhere and into your pocket.

The other aspect of the mechanics worth returning to is that the items you carry with you give you a +1 to your roll, if they’re useful. This makes players think about what they’ve picked up – and what it might do for them. Some of the weirdest and best interactions roleplaying have come from very odd ideas about objects that players have purloined.



WHY SHOULD YOU PLAY IT?

Tunnel Goons has some really good adventures written for it. Check out what is, in my opinion, the best roleplaying game book ever, *The Haunted Alamanc* (currently back in print at Games Omnivorous) as this contains most of Nate’s own adventures, such as The Moldy Unicorn (classic starter pub and dungeon), The Astral Curse of the Iron Gnomes (a dungeon with various sympathetic factions), The Eternal Caves of Urk (tunnels and dungeon generator) and Viridia’s Garden (a kid-friendly under-pond dungeon).

Each has their own hooks, charms and spark of life in them. I’ve personally run The Moldy Unicorn multiple times for multiple groups, and it brings about totally different games depending on who is playing. In this starter adventure your players have to work their way into the pub and eventually find a reason to go to the nearby Snail-people themed dungeon. There’s a fun and simple puzzle, some baddies to bash, amusing traps and secret rooms to explore – and because it’s about six rooms in size it can take less than an hour to adventure through. That’s assuming your players don’t get caught up in the huge variety of amusing shenanigans at the bar beforehand.

Viridia’s Garden is a great introduction to adventuring for young people (you can get an eight year old on board easily) as it is again, short, charming, and has a simple potentially non-threatening setting. It’s particularly good because, created for charming location

like all of the worlds *Tunnel Goons* it’s a wander through a where combat isn’t necessarily the only mechanic. The NPCs and



other characters are written with simple hooks that, as a GM, seem to suggest ‘just have a go, it’s fine, do the first stupid voice that comes to mind’.

Nate’s work seems to focus on this brevity – which makes sense as most of the work of Highland Paranormal Society appears as small zines and pamphlets. A few pages, a few rooms, and a good time is all that’s offered.

And because its dungeon crawling for the most part you’re not overloading players with ideas about their character’s backstory. You can let the lore of your game emerge organically as you play. They’ll probably find out about what their character are up to while talking to someone they meet along the way.

Nate’s writing is the perfect balance of ‘just enough’. Every room, location and item description gives GMs a way to spin the story just that little bit further, that little bit weirder and most importantly – that little more interesting. Each description is hook to sink your teeth into if you’re running the game, and as a player, it offers a world of possibilities. Often this leads to a situation where the GM might ask “what do you think happens?” to the players, but the game is all the better for it.

If you’ve ever thought you wanted to try a roleplaying game, but didn’t quite know how, *Tunnel Goons* is the perfect way in. And if you’re bored of what you’re playing now, maybe it’s time to give it a try? The Caverns of Urk are calling. 🐉

DOWNLOAD TUNNEL GOONS FOR FREE



GET TUNNEL GOONS ADVENTURES



BUY NATE’S COLLECTED WORK



The Soloist

MAPS

Each month we explore the world solo gaming one move at a time, this month: mapping and worldbuilding games

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

Last year I ran a Kickstarter for Zinequest for a stupid little game called *The Taming of the Slugiraffe*. Me and my partner put it together in an afternoon (she did I art, I did the writing and design) to see if we were able to. It turned out we were, and that it's quite good fun running a Kickstarter for something small and silly like that. We're printing the game this month and it should be with our

'backers' soon. A key aspect of the game was something I thought was quite novel – the mapping of the world you inhabit. In *The Taming of the Slugiraffe* players roll dice to explore random new areas, and when they do, they draw a line between their previous location and the new one. That makes it easier to travel between these spaces and carry out the unique activities there. We thought this was an interesting nod to the way games like

Dark Souls open up shortcuts to later areas of the game, making future progress easier.

Anyway, it turns out these ideas are pretty old hat. We weren't being innovative at all. Which is fine, we did it for fun (and to learn how an actual Kickstarter worked).

Mapping in solo roleplaying games has been around for a long time – whether that's creating the hexmap as you go, or scribbling out aspects of a dungeon as it comes to light.

THREE GREAT SOLO GAMES WITH MAPPING

MIRU

Miru asks players to roll on random tables to fill in hexes as they travel across a great open plain (to begin with anyway). Each turn you as a player will be looking for resources to build up your ability to survive (with food, for example) and equipment. The world of *Miru* is one of solarpunk (think friendlier cyberpunk with more lights on) and tragedy. Looking for the god in charge of the robots that killed your brother, you'll be hoping to unlock enough strange equipment to make ending the life of a god possible. One of the key bit of mapping fun is finding instructions about the location of other parts of the world, a meeting with a fellow hunter might tell you that there's a radio tower three hexes to the south – creating a kind of 'let's go over there' sense of wonder.



WE SAIL BEYOND

An often-mentioned game world generating tool from Sealed Library. This is designed in part to create a world for other games, and as such has rules about what is true in the universe. While this is difficult to implement for solo play, the world generation itself (there's rules for adding rivers, biomes and so on) is a worthwhile game on its own. If you did want to discover if something is true on the map or not later, you can always roll when you get to that part of the world. The game encourages you to draw a map and then, at the end, rip it in half to start your adventure with. This might only be for the brave!

This month's The Soloist is very much a list of 'games that did it better' than our own attempt. What all of the games listed below do is create a sense of wonder while building something. My first experience of this was probably *Disciples of Bone & Shadow* – a solo roleplaying game where you create a hexmap as you explore the world, discovering strange and interesting things next to one another. Again like those Dark Souls games there's a kind of storytelling around the world's context. If there's a ruin with a large monster in and a polluted stream nearby, it suggests that maybe this is where the monster travels for water or washing. It's not a lot, but it's a totally organically generated story in the world that isn't instructed directly from the page itself. If you find rare materials there, then maybe this monster has some relation to those materials.

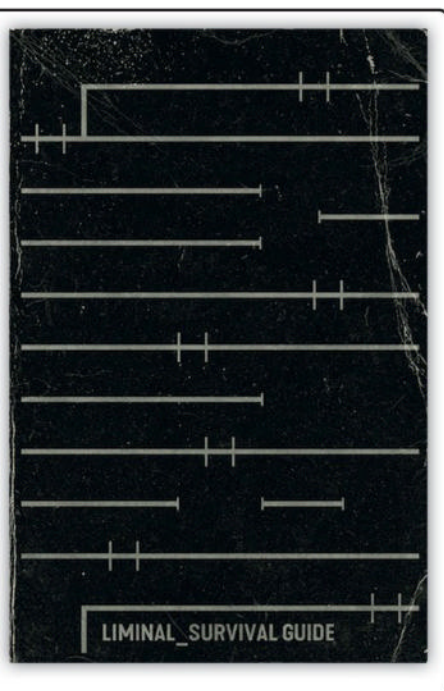
Other games are more tightly defined, like *Miru*. You play a hero looking for vengeance against the robot that killed your brother – except no one remembers who is in control of the robot, and instead of looking for direct revenge, you set out to kill the god responsible

for all of it. This cool setting allows for a tighter sense of place. *Disciples of Bone & Shadow* creates ideas between geographic locations, whereas *Miru* introduces you to vignettes of a specific world every time you roll. You're not really doing any journaling here, just noting the enemies, terrain and events on each hex you move through. On top of this the game uses a calendar system, so as the days pass, you'll trigger 'god events' which can cause huge effects to any given area. *Miru* is a kind of survival game, where you're looking for the best way to get powered up and ready to fight something impossibly bigger than you.

Liminal, on the other hand is designed to be more of a horror experience. Here the mapping is done on gridded paper, and each time you enter a room you will roll for the number of exits. If there aren't any, it's time to backtrack and try and find another route out of the horror. The setting is one of exploring dark, endless halls, dealing with looping spaces, strange entities in the wall, and some surreal set pieces. If you've played the ill-fated Playstation 5 demo game, *PT*, then you know what you're in for. If

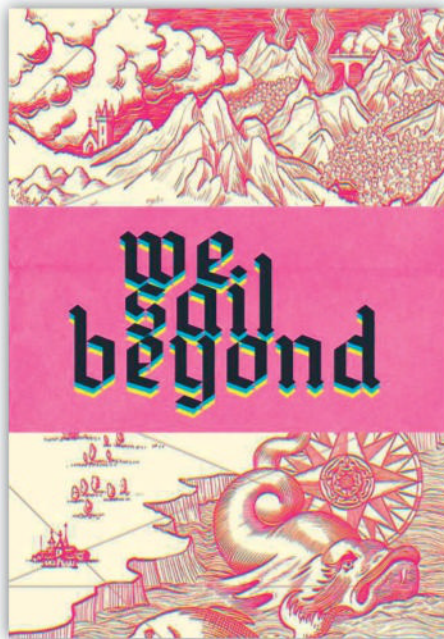
you've watched *Skinamarink* (I can't recommend it, it's a tough watch) the idea of being hunted in a somewhat domestic space might be appealing. Here you're drawing out the spaces as you go, with a sense that there's really no end in sight. Escape is rare and difficult to discover, and luck plays some part in it. Again, the evocative writing is what drives this game – suddenly discovering a room with a Willy Wonka style swan boat ride in it brings out exciting ideas about the state of the world itself.

Mapping in solo roleplaying games is a balance of creating the world, and letting you see it for yourself. Whether you're looking for a world to explore that unravels in front of you, or a mechanical device to apply pressure to your characters, there's plenty of options. 🍷



LIMINAL

Horror in solo RPGs is often tricky to drum up, you've got to scare yourself after all. Instead this is more of a horror-themed surreal exploration game. Players roll dice to generate new rooms as they enter them and the doors that lead on from there. You're mapping these out on grid paper, making it simple to create a 4x4 room for example. Soon you have a labyrinth of rooms and walls that offer almost zero escape. An additional interesting element here is the way the game can sometimes 'warp' you elsewhere – sometimes by something in the walls grabbing you and pushing you out somewhere else – which involves dropping dice onto the map to see where you're being spat out. A surreal and jolly little mapping game.





9.3

BOARDGAME GEEK RATING

"Has to be the best
indie card game around."

– CUSTOMER REVIEW

"A beautiful battle for fantasy
kingdoms comes to our
tabletops, and your very
life is on the line."

– TABLETOP GAMING MAGAZINE

ACHROMA

THE EVOLVING CARD GAME



CROWDFUNDING NOW ON
KICKSTARTER



my favourite game

CHRIS BISSETTE

Indie roleplaying game designer and host of the Tabletop Gaming Indie RPG Book Club Chris Bissette tell us why *The Vanilla Game* is pretty much perfect

There's a tradition in OSR (Old School Revival/ Renaissance) games of people codifying their house rules for running *D&D*-style games, shaving chunks of systems and procedures off blogs and other games and stapling them together into a chimeric new game that represents what the writer wants from a fantasy adventure game. This is how we get *Mausritter* (Games Omnivorous) taking the heart of *Into The Odd* and grafting it on to *Knave*'s inventory-defined characters with magic and the actual inventory system taken from the blogs *Goblin Punch* and *Last Gasp Grimoire*. *Best Left Buried* takes *Maze Rats* and hacks in zones from *Fate* alongside a more considered sanity system from *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*. My own *A Dungeon Game* taking my favourite bits of both *bastards*. (Micah Anderson) and *The Vanilla Game* alongside a light system ripped from Logan Knight's blog and reimagined to work with a roll-under system.

The Vanilla Game sits in this tradition, splicing together Jared's house rules for running *Labyrinth Lord* alongside procedures taken from his own *Anti-Sisyphus* zines, an inventory system that feels closer to something from story games like *Blades In The Dark* than traditional fantasy dungeon games, and a bestiary that says "you know what *D&D* is. Here's how it works in this particular iteration of the game." And when I phrase it like that, you're probably thinking "what's so special about this?"

And that's a hard question to answer, isn't it? When a rules system works well it gets out of the way to the extent that you barely even notice it. You play, completely at ease without any worry about "knowing the rules" or "getting things wrong". And occasionally the game says, "hey, I see you're trying to do this thing.

We have rules for that." So you use them, and you carry on without any friction, and when you get to the end of the session you look back and think *wow. We barely interacted with the rules at all.* Some people will tell you that this is a sign 'of poor design,' but I think it's entirely the opposite. Rules are there to elide the boring parts of things so that you can get back to what's fun. Old school *D&D* is fundamentally a resource management game, but nobody *really* enjoys tracking inventory; *Vanilla Game* abstracts it in a way that is frictionless but still leads to meaningful, consequential decisions for players. Everyone enjoys monsters but few people enjoy huge stat blocks and having to track lots of figures; *Vanilla Game* bases all of the monster numbers around their Hit Dice (functionally their level, if you're not *au fait* with the lingo of OSR games) and gives them One Cool Thing they can do, and then says 'we trust you.'

And when the rules *do* make themselves front and centre, they're delightful. Some of my favourite moments in gaming since I started nearly 30 years ago have come directly from *Vanilla Game*'s magical mishaps table. Skeletons trapped in a huge spiderweb blocking a crossroads that the players needed to get through; players trying to Turn Undead and accidentally transforming them into snakes; a black pudding that got accidentally enlarged and ate the entire party.

The Vanilla Game is everything I want in a dungeon crawling adventure game – all killer, no filler, and a ton of fun. It's free online (check out vanillagame.carrd.co) and also can boast having one of the best adventures ever written in the form of Luke Gearing's *The Isle*. If I hadn't written my own dungeon adventure game, I'd run *The Vanilla Game* every day for the rest of my life. 🍷



“ Rules are there to elide the boring parts of things so that you can get back to what's fun ”

PARANOID (ABOUT) ANDROIDS

With the explosion of AI tools for art and writing, we ask, will it change gaming forever? We talk to designer and artists to get their take...

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

Artificial Intelligence, as it is now conceived, isn't anything like what we were promised. AI as a concept has been around for a long time. Science fiction has presented it in multiple ways, sometimes as a benevolent helper, sometimes as a human doppelgänger, and at other times as a murderous god. We've got HAL from 2001: A Space Odyssey, the Androids from Alien and the cruel computer-god of Harlan Ellison's I Have No Mouth But I Must Scream. In short, we're used to the depictions of AI being something to be a little more than paranoid about.

Today we're faced with a kind of 'rebrand' of AI. Rather than a machine that will be intelligent like a person, we have the trained neural networks of programs like ChatGPT and MidJourney. The former is a way of generating text through a given prompt – I could, for example, ask it to write an introduction to board games by simply instructing it. MidJourney is an AI 'art' tool which does much the same thing but for images.

The dummies guide for AI tools like these is that these networks are 'trained' on large datasets – a huge library of image and text, such as the internet. This means these models look at the visual patterns created by these digital images and attempt to replicate things like brushstrokes, form, objects, and so on. Similarly for text these networks absorb texts to 'understand' them and then be able to create 'correct' outputs that seem, on the face of it, at least like really bad copywriting for cheap websites.

These, we are told, are what the future of

AI – and both have been met by total outrage by the creative communities whose work these have been trained upon.

Big publishers like Chaosium have explicitly come out against the use of AI art in work that they commission. Chaosium are generally a publisher who is happy to try new things. They tried NFT-based products before it was a *whole thing* that got people angry for example. They quickly shut down the NFT product line (it was really just an experiment after all) when it was clear that there were big concerns about the technology and the people who wanted everyone to use it. I bring this up to say it's not luddite publishers of games, it's serious and technologically interested players in the hobby who are rejecting AI art as unethical.

The unethical claim comes from the fact that the models were trained on art in a non-consensual way. A well-used prompt modifier for people who had become 'AI artists' was 'popular on artstation'. ArtStation is a major platform for artists to share their portfolios, and this felt like directly admitting the art was 'stolen'. Prompts like that aren't very different than writing 'in the style of Van Gogh'.

It's difficult to talk about AI art in particular because we always want to give it an agency that it doesn't have. We suggest that it 'understands' something – it can't. We say that it's stolen something – it hasn't. It's not really copying, but it's not really creating either.

It's a thorny mess of our sci-fi fears of a new, powerful technology and curiosity about it mixed with a kind of empty feeling that a lot of the artwork has.

I had dismissed much of AI art, alongside

much of the gaming community as something that's a little bit hollow or just a toy. Sure, it would be used instead of real artists by some companies looking to save money or just improve their shareholder returns above all else. Sure, it would be used to create terrible images previous unthinkable. Sure, it's fun to generate a picture of Pikachu in the style of Mondrian. But that would be the extent of it.

And then I saw the AI artwork being produced by Sean Aaberg – the creator of one of my favourite games, *Dungeon Degenerates*. One of the things I love about *Dungeon Degenerates* is the vibrant 'acid vomit' art style. It's all Aaberg's artwork and shows his uncompromising standards. It's punk art from a real punk and entirely uninterested in being mainstream – although its humour often manages to draw people in. It's got satire in the Robert Crumb style baked into it.

When I first spoke to Sean, back in issue 40 of this magazine, he was still feeling the full effects of the stroke he had at the end of 2018. The stroke effected the dominant side of his body that he usually used for creating art. He's not truly been able to draw in the same way since. The loss of his own style, cultivated over years of his own engagement with art, games, politics and the punk scene was now slightly frozen in time (until he makes a full recovery).

The idea that Sean was using AI to generate art was intriguing. It could be about the navigation of the effect of the stroke for an artist who still wanted to create. We reached out to Sean to see if he would share his thoughts on making art using MidJourney, and here's what he said...

LOOK OUT HONEY, 'CAUSE I'M USING TECHNOLOGY


By Sean Aaberg

I understand why so many artists and people in general are so bugged out by AI art tools and computers and robots and automation in general. We have a healthy fear of obsolescence, of losing our value as people, of not surviving in general and a good respect for the human touch and craftsmanship. The powers that be haven't shown a good track record on prioritizing any of this either. But, while people's fears, hatreds and beliefs are understood by me, I feel that these are lesser emotions that shouldn't be encouraged and reality is always a lot messier than the world of beliefs. Ultimately, while progress frequently has negative side-effects it cannot be and shouldn't be stopped.

Besides automation and the class conflict that arises there, people are adamant that these programs are art theft. I just can't see it. The process has been described as the program sampling millions of pictures. From a copyright mentality, if a certain amount of a work is recognizable then it is possibly copyright infringement. The claim seems more that users of various platforms had their images scraped without their permission. This seems more like a privacy issue. If people are looking for a payout for uploading their work to the web, I have no idea how that would work. Maybe I don't get it, having only been a hired gun artist out of necessity, not out of choice. Good AI art I've seen hasn't resembled something that has existed before, it is a wholly new vision based on what the programs can and can't do. The bad has been the same kind of derivative fluff plaguing the internet since its inception, the one chuckle takes on pop culture with a twist that says more about the state of people's brains than the AI. Honestly, I don't understand the tech enough or the state of hired gun artists to

argue for or against it in this case, but the theft argument doesn't ring true. Plus, we live in a post-modern, post-Warhol world where art is what the artist and their supporters say it is and there is no putting that Genie back in the bottle. If you want to go further, we've been living with samplers and DJs for forty-plus years, and these things were decried as non-musical and theft since the beginning. Collage and pastiche can be amazing if they are done right and that frequently means done by the right person.

A PUNK'S JOURNEY TO AI

My thoughts on technology have changed and matured over time. When I was a teenage Anarcho Punk I was a total Luddite. Handwriting only, no computer, no car, no bank card, I even went without shoes or a clock for a while! But, I was dependent on my parents. That was my "secret". There is definitely value to humanity unaided by technology and independence. But there is more value to honesty and thoughtfulness. There is no question. But over time, 



IS AI ART CHANGING GAMING FOREVER?



right hand, I used to have tremors in my left hand which compounded on the lack of control and made drawing really difficult! I can't drum traditionally anymore. This loss cannot be understood abstractly, it has to be lived. I have invested countless hours filling sketchbooks, drawing tons of finished pieces, studying and even going to classes. I've put in my time.

I'm not using the AI to do my old style, I'm working in a Northern Renaissance style evocative of Bosch and Brueghel in themes of European Paganism and the pre-Christian world. I'm using Midjourney Version 3, because I like the limitations and lack of polish of that version. I consider working with

limitations more interesting and human than machine perfection. I find interpreting the work more interesting and what I want from art than trying to get exactly what I want out of it.

Craftsmanship and the human touch are going to be valued forever, in fact the more we are able to do with technology the more the human touch will be valued. There are definitely going to be jobs lost, but whenever one door closes, another opens. We have developed machines tremendously in the last hundred years, but biological evolution progresses very slowly. Humans shouldn't be in competition with machines. AI art programs, Midjourney in particular, are





what Art and being an artist mean to me, it's something you call yourself and other people call you. Craft is something that people with not an ounce of creativity can excel at. It is the execution of the work. Most artists have to be both creative and good craftspeople, especially when they are starting out. So yes, AI art tools can be a crutch if you are supposed to be learning a craft, but some people need crutches.

This isn't an argument, or a rationalization or an excuse, it's an explanation and a statement of understanding. I also see it as a rallying cry for showing the borg what we're good at as people and what makes us special and unique. 🟩

“ Good AI art I've seen hasn't resembled something that has existed before, it is a wholly new vision based on what the programs can and can't do. The bad has been the same kind of derivative fluff plaguing the internet since its inception. ”

helping me achieve a sort of visually creative feeling that I haven't felt for too long. The work is definitely different from stuff I would have produced in the past, but the past is the past and things have changed.

THE ARTIST, NOT THE TOOL

When I was younger and teaching, I deliberately drew with Sharpies so that I and my students had a drawing tool that could easily be purchased anywhere in the country. I drew in crayon in my sketchbooks for a similar reason. I coloured using Sharpies for the same reason, but ceased and started using photoshop when scanning and printing the work didn't yield the results I was after. So many times people have asked what kinds of pens I use: it's not the pens that do the work, it's the artist. I believe that this extends to all tools. I see how AI is different, but ultimately it's another tool.

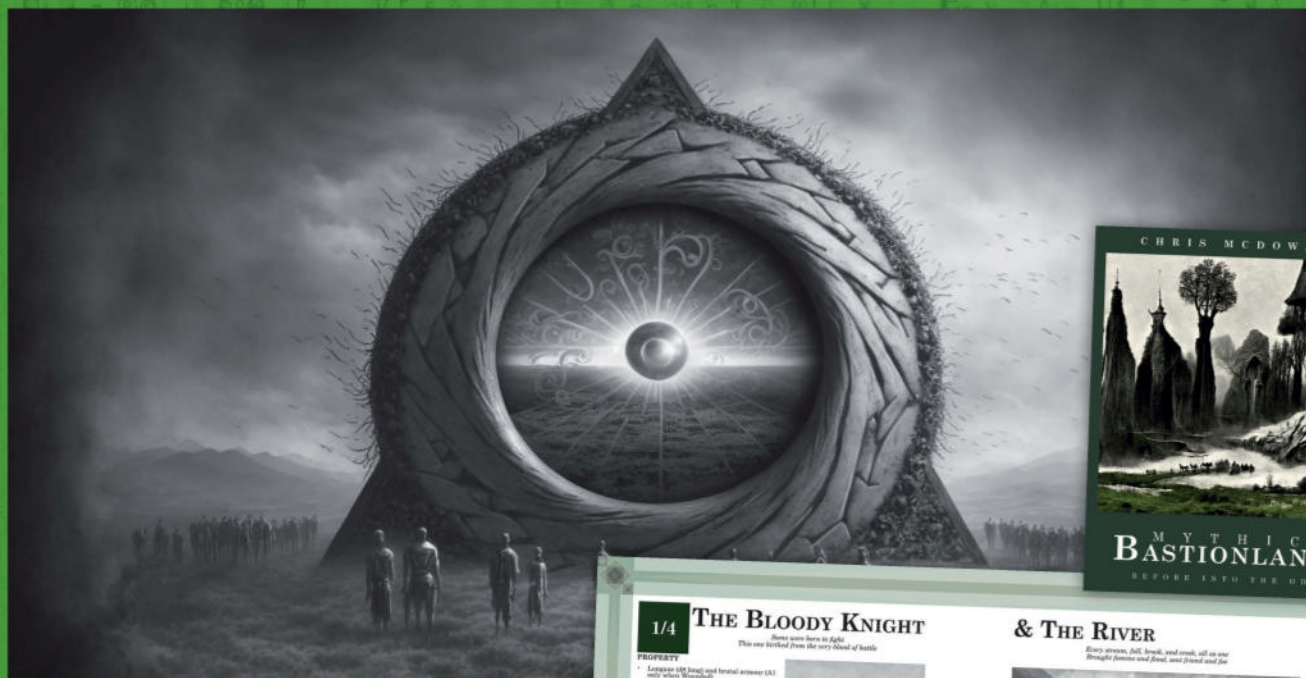
I suppose this comes down to what is Art and what is Craft? I've been creative as long as I can remember, my brain has just been

spilling over with ideas forever. I decided to be an artist when I was in the second grade because my teacher, Mr. Osborne, recognized the creative spark in me. I didn't understand the road to becoming an artist, but it was one I was going to travel. Throughout school there were always kids who were better at drawing than me, even some that were more creative, but they lacked the determination, drive and will power to stick with it and declare to the world that they were an Artist. That's



THE USEFUL AI – A STAND IN AN INSPIRATION

Chris McDowall on the usefulness of AI artwork



I'll still be using human artists for my games, but for the drafting and playtesting phase I've found AI art to be a really useful tool. You can create a wealth of placeholder art to help you envisage how the final game will look and set the tone for your playtesters.

Previously I would have used public domain art for this sort of thing, but this method is faster and allows for bespoke pieces to be created. For *Mythic Bastionland* in particular it has been fun to play around with the uncanny, dreamlike style that you get from some of the pieces, and some of them might even find their way onto the inspiration board that I'm compiling to share with the human artist for the final pieces.

IT'S ABOUT THE ETHICS

There are a few ways to consider the ethics of AI art. The use of copyrighted images in the learning models are well recognised, and in some cases will reproduce those original images once again when prompted (see Eric Wallace et al's paper on 'Extracting Training Data from Diffusion Models'). There was a scandal on Twitter in the artist community when some artists spotted their signatures were present or being recreated in the AI artwork created by

some training models. Again, it's difficult to stress how hard it is to avoid ascribing blame as if the AI is doing something immoral. It's just outputting data as blindly as it consumes it – or rather, without what we would consider human understanding.

But where are the ethical uses of AI art? Some argue that the way AI art would quickly replace human illustrators with 'work' that is passable but a little lifeless is one of these ethical concerns. But I think there's a good argument

that: if you're replacing yourself, then that's not so bad. If you were going to do some rough sketches of something to work out the layout of a game you were writing, or you needed quick, but vibes-filled tokens to drop in to your game - it seems fine enough.

This is exactly what Chris McDowall of *Into The Odd* and *Electric Bastionland* fame did for the playtest versions of his upcoming *Mythic Bastionland* as seen above.

AI ALLURE

So far we've ignored the core draw of AI art. It is usually crazy, weird, and outside of what human artists tend to create. It's got a certain amount of interest inherent in its failures. Popular face generating twitter accounts 'These People Don't Exist' was quite good at creating a lot of very normal-but-a-bit-off faces who would like to connect with you on LinkedIn. More interesting though was when the machine generating these would produce bonus ears, too many eyes, and - importantly - too many fingers. These bonus mutations were part of the fun, and are what drives the interest in AI art at all - something very normal that's a little bit wrong.

Johan Nohr, graphic designer, artist, and part of the game design teams behind *MÖRK BORG* was initially drawn in by these tools, but soon found the ethical position simply too tricky, and the output inauthentic.

It wasn't his.

JOHAN NOHR

I must admit, at first when AI art became known to me, I was fascinated with the phenomenon and hoped it would become a valuable tool for artists to use when making mood boards, referencing compositions or making color palettes etc. But then I heard about the algorithm, how it learns and mimics, and that whole ethical clusterfuck and now I just feel sad about how saturated the TTRPG space has become with AI pieces. I firmly believe that you're not the artist if you tell a computer what to draw, just as I'm not the artist if I commission an illustration, no matter how detailed the brief is. The only art you're making is the prompt itself, that short string of words. Perhaps you can call it poetry if you really want. The visual art based on this prompt is not yours; it's the AI's. I would be happy to see less AI art in TTRPGs. People claim that this has opened up the possibility of making art, that they couldn't do it before; I can't understand that. Grab a pen and paper. Draw something. You're now an artist. Now practice, practice, practice. Eventually, you will be better than any AI. And the art will be yours, with your own style, and will have come straight from your heart.

And finally we thought we'd turn to someone who talked about looking for a specific sense of overwhelming wonder when it came to his games, *Troika's* Daniel Sell. Daniel has made a name for himself and Melsonian Arts Council by putting out uncompromising books and games that are as close to art or literature as you can be while still having some instructions about how to roll dice. The last time we spoke there was a certain focus on the idea of authenticity and 'intent' when someone creates something that can be called art. So we thought we'd check in and see what Daniel's take is.

AI AND DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

Is there a case for using modern AI like ChatGPT/MidJourney in tabletop games? If so, what is it? If not, why not?

They're a fad, a cute toy, and should be treated as such. Use them for your own 📌



IS AI ART CHANGING GAMING FOREVER?

entertainment in your own private games, but don't expect an increasingly savvy public to pay for it. We're paying for individual expression and innovation, not a robot's mindless recombination.

Would you consider using them for your own games?

I've played with ChatGPT a bit, and it is, like I said, quite fun. It is extremely limited and can produce writing you'd expect from a basic hack writer. "d6 rats, 10x10 room" stuff, WoTC stuff. The only real use case I have found is ad copy writing, since that requires someone willing to have no shame and to be painfully aware of best practices.

As for art? No. At best it produces faux psychedelic or photo realistic, painfully literal, concept art gumpf. If I was working for the big publishers as an illustrator I'd be worried about my job, but for anything that lets an artist create art or innovate even slightly it's no threat whatsoever.

When we talked about Troika! the other month we focused a lot on 'authorship' – is the use of AI tools a full death of the author/artist thing [again]?

The author is definitely not present in AI art, and people are pretending they're doing a William S Burroughs cutup by using it. Even collages require choice in the source of the media being cutup, no matter how full-on radio you go. The AI is positioned as an idiot middleman and takes away any sense of the universe communicating with you. Again, it's nothing to be concerned about really.

Do you think there are ethical concerns with using this tech?

Absolutely. These things are art launderers. They exist to break the chain of inspiration completely, a cultural bottleneck that aims to separate us from our fellow humans and weaken us to limp commercial filler. Not a tool but a trap. Steal from people, but when you are influenced someone you should look them in the face and thank them, and then thank the people they stole and borrowed from and so on down the line. We should gratefully mug artists who stand at the front of a line of bodies going back to someone painting in ash on the cave wall. The AI is a filter that prevents our ancient family from passing through and will in time render you down as well into its easily digested word soup.



ALL'S WELL THAT AI'S WELL

The current panic about AI art and writing taking over the art of making games – or at least the art for them – is a valid fear. It's an ethical issue that's more to with labour than the idea that someone is really going to be replaced when it comes to the actual designing of physical games. There's ethical uses for it, but we're still trying to work that out.

My opinion? We have to remember that the reason we create anything is to express experiences in some way. An AI chatbot could have written this article, but you wouldn't be reading anything grounded in real human experiences. That's not even to elevate this piece, but just to articulate that this is the point of language.

There's a fundamental misunderstanding

about people assumed, and that's that we work like computers. It's happened across much of history. The idea that humans are the tools they use, or drawn from the world around them. And once the computer is invented, with its binaries of yes and no, we were suddenly turned into complex decision trees in the popular conception. Your body is the hardware and your mind the software. You'll do this-then-that, because you can program yourself.

AI itself is a flawed concept, because it can't truly understand anything, so the work it produces is without that understanding. We play games to be with other human beings, and we play board games in part because they're real, physical, authentic objects. For now I don't see how AI is going to create worlds we can really enjoy playing in. 🍎

IN ISSUE 77

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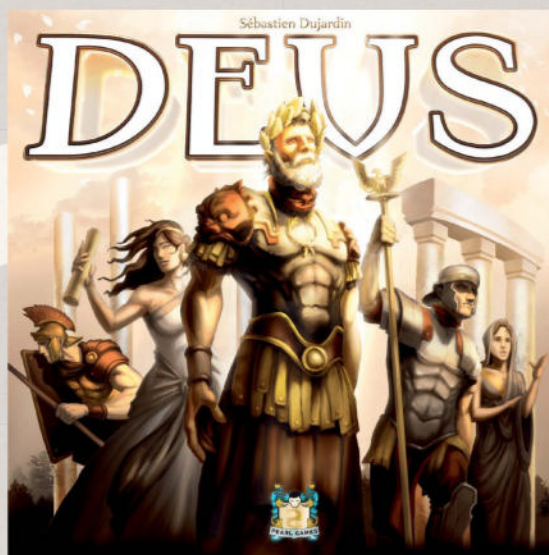
Words by **Chad Wilkinson**

Sandwiched between France and Germany, Belgium seems comparatively dwarfed, geographically speaking. But, as this highly developed country recognises, size isn't everything. This point is made clearer still when acknowledging Belgium's hosting of headquarters for organisations including the European Union, NATO, and the WTO. Thankfully though, the country also plays host to a far less austere collection of tabletop focused shops, publishers, designers, and festivals, all contributing to a modern Belgian board game boom.

Belgium's gaming history unfortunately doesn't stretch back very far, with the hobby seemingly still being in its infancy compared to the country's sporting history. Nonetheless, an honourable mention must be made on the origin of darts. Vogelpik is an early precursor to Belgian Darts, originating in the late 1700s and utilising primitive pointed missiles in the form of a bird. That's right, actual stuffed birds with a needle wedged in their beaks. Later, this evolved into just using turkey feathers for flights; a less comical image but a relief for the birds no doubt.

Boasting more of a history are Belgium's cafes, of which several now cater to the board gaming crowd. The most prolific of these are the Outpost Gamecenter's, located in Brussels, Ghent, and Antwerp. The cafes mainly stock and host events for collectible card games, although board games are available as well, and the popular chain also maintain a well-stocked website.

Also in Brussels is the Kings & Queens Cafe, specialising in cocktails and party games but possessing a vast and varied library. Visitors can check out the impressive games list beforehand through the cafe's website, where titles can be filtered by style, difficulty, and player count.



South of Brussels in the city of Charleroi, the Ludotrotter games store offers events and competitions, whilst north, in Antwerp, players can settle into a game and glass of homemade iced tea in the cozy Bordspelcafe & Spellenwinkel.

Since around 2010, Belgian retailers such as Case Départ, Fol' en Jeux, and Dédale games store have noted considerable revenue boosts and store visitors. Similarly, the growth of the Brussels Games Festival from a small hotel lobby to a huge, free event in Cinquantenaire Park points towards the hobby's resurgence. Amidst the pandemic, the festival rejigged its usual format into virtual exhibitions and a number of smaller events in partnership with venues including the grand Vaux-Hall and various cafes, and companies such as Ludo Ludo; a Brussels-based board game rental subscription service. The festival has also partnered with brand new publisher Haumea Games to promote their Kickstarter for *Valroc* – a drafting, worker-placement game of competing wizards.

It's mere coincidence, but several of my earliest modern game experiences can be credited to Belgian designers. Games such as Kris Burm's *Yinsh* – from the incredibly smart Project GIPF series of two-player abstract games – and Xavier Georges' *Royal Palace* and *Troyes* introduced me to modern euros and abstracts. Many other gamers likely cut their teeth on the immensely popular *Small World* by Philippe Keyaerts, Sébastien Dujardin's *Deus*, or the compact dwarven antics of Frédéric Moyersoën's 2004 title *Saboteur*.

There's no shortage of Belgian publishers too, from the small and lesser known companies such as Flatlined Games, BYR Games, Sit Down!, and InPatience – the latter responsible for Shadi Torbey's Oniverse line of solo and cooperative games – to more prominent companies like Game Brewer and Repos Productions. Belgian designs in Game Brewers catalogue include *Hippocrates* by Alain Orban, Wim Goosens' *Oak*, and *Pixie Queen*; the company's debut project, designed by Rudy Seuntjens.

Whilst paling in comparison to its fellow European neighbours, the board game boom in Belgium is far from negligible. Thanks to a host of talented designers, publishers, and business owners, Belgium has become a notable part of Europe's broader tabletop scene. 🇧🇪





NO RULE

Our round up of the good, the bad and the ugly of non-gaming, nearly-gaming, sort-of-gaming stuff

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

STRONGHOLD 200+ XL CONVERTIBLE, GAMEGENIC

Gamegenic have been firing out exciting storage solutions for gamers for a while now, and the Stronghold 200+ XL is certainly my favourite so far. Bigger than the original Watchtower and not as ludicrously large as the Lair, this gives gamers multiple transport options for game nights. We've used ours for miniatures and token storage and transport, creating what could be considered a 'minimalist RPG go bag', except it's a box, obviously. You could get a lot of deck options into the two main compartments (200ish, sleeved, as you may have guessed from the name) which means you can carry your main decks or even commander decks around with you easily. The magnets that are used to

hold the removable flaps are strong and the whole thing feels great. Plus, the colours are incredible – the hot pink one we looked at nearly *glows*.



£43

GET IT? YES



FANTASY CHARACTER KIT & GAME MASTER'S FANTASY TOOLKIT, ROLL & PLAY PRESS

It's game's night. You said you're run the next RPG session. You thought you'd have loads of time, but it turns out that the procrastination machine needed polishing, twice! Luckily, you've read half of the game book you wanted to run for your group, and you've got Roll & Play's *Fantasy Character Kit* (£16) and *The Game Master's Fantasy Tool Kit* (£14). These thrifty, ring-bound books offer tables and tables and tables of character, adventure and treasure ideas to quickly roll up when needed. The *Character Kit* feels quite D&D adjacent and might be useful for those looking to develop deeper character with interesting hooks, but the most useful book here is the GM's toolkit. The writing is good and light, prompting you into enticing encounters, interesting injuries and amusing misfires. We think this would

also serve well as a supplemental solo roleplaying book.



£14/16

GET IT? YES



ROLL UP!
ROLL UP!

FALLOUT WASTELAND WARFARE: ROBOT PROTECTRON WORKERS, MODIPHIUS

In the future there's mostly rust. Rust, sand, and amusingly out of place nostalgic signage. In *Fallout*'s future anyway. And whatever mean things we have to say about it, at least they got to inventing robots before the world ended. These Protectron Workers are lovely models that could be used for *Fallout: Wasteland Warfare* (or indeed, the *Fallout* roleplaying game) – but are perfect stand ins for robots in almost any game. Because of their silly aesthetic (a little lumpy, a little top-heavy) they're well placed to stand in for NPC robots, C-3PO style buddies, and dumb, hackable guards. Putting

them together is a bit of a pain because of the top-heavy nature of the models, but once it's done, they're good fun to paint and use.



£24

GET IT? YES

HEY SIRI,
HOW DOES THE
WORLD END?



S REQUIRED

CALL TO ADVENTURE HIGH FANTASY ART DECK, BROTHERWISE GAMES

This little box offers you the chance to flick through 100 pieces of high fantasy art on one side, and a couple of prompts on the other. With room for notes, the box suggests. The art is nice, but a bit disjointed – it's difficult to see how you're going to spin up an encounter or scene by either random draw or flicking through. The cards are tarot sized, which suggests you could do a classic cut of the cards to find the future of your adventure... except the prompts on the other side are a little bit uninspiring. The writing is fine, but a bit specific to the art. These kind of 'spark' card sets are best when they suggest something and link together with one another – when they 'yes and...' together. We very much like Brotherwise Games, but here they're very much missing the spark.



PROMPTLY
REGISTERED



£13

GET IT? NO



MEGA CONSTRUX BULBASAUUR, MATTEL

After last month's attempt at the famous electric mouse, we thought we'd take a look at everyone's second or third favourite starter Pokémon. This kit took our Professional Brickist around 40 minutes to evolve from a pile of bricks into a moveable, posable, grass-type. The vines and legs can be trained into whatever position you'd like, and unlike the Pikachu of issue 75 there's lots of patterned bricks, which may make construction easier. The age rating here (7+) can be believed, and younger brick clickers can probably be left to their own devices for most of the build.



£23

GET IT? YES

GOTTA
CATCH AT
LEAST ONE
OF THEM

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: THE TEETH OF DAHLVER- NAR, WIZKIDS

Teeth, they say, have a psychological link to anxiety.

And this is especially true when someone around your gaming table says something like "would you like to see the bag of teeth I have with me?" Maybe they'd follow it up, in reaction to the look on your face with "don't worry, I paid eighty quid for them!" This set of 20 teeth ranging from the giant Green Steel Pit Fiend Fang down to the Halfling Canine (which smaller than a child's tooth, the scale seems off?) is a big bag of fantasy teeth. In game they can be planted or implanted for cool effects, summoning or otherwise. It's a cool *D&D* Tooth Fairy story for the game itself. And it's probably the worst thing that WizKids have put out in their usually extremely cool Icons of the Realm range of ornamental props. Usually we're pretty big fans of this stuff (massive Tiamat? Brilliant! Eye and hand of Vecna in an actual Bell Jar? Amazing!) – but this seems like such an odd misstep. Unless your *D&D* campaign revolves around these particular artefacts to such an extent that physically possessing them as props if is going to improve your game.

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WORSE THAN
IT'S BITE



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GET IT? NO



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Ludological Lamentations

EXASPERATED WITHOUT EXPLANATION

Each month our in-house agony aunt, Ben Maddox,
answers your ludological lamentations

Words by **Ben Maddox**

Q. Dear Ben,

I like to think of myself as pretty well read. If I crane my neck (against my chiropractor's advice), I can see a shelf of books and I've read a few of them. I even got through the first 100 pages of *Infinite Jest* and hardly anyone who isn't lying can say that. Still, much to my own chagrin, I don't know everything and cannot embark on something completely in the dark. Like playing a new board game for example. I can't just rip off the shrink, set it up and go. I need to know how to play first. To understand what I do on my turn before I jump in and start fingering the pieces.

Not so with Jenny. Ahh, Jenny, a sweet soul who always shows up to every game night with a grab bag of prawn cocktail and a smile. Jenny, who once put me out when I'd set myself on fire (looong story). I love Jenny but there is one little annoyance. One little blemish on an otherwise flawless personality. She has the attention span of an easily distracted gnat.

Every week it's the same. I lay the board out on the table. I read the rules and set everyone's components out before they arrive and after everyone has settled down, I start to explain how to play. I think it would be easier to explain my issue by writing a short playlet. I've entitled it, *The Tragedy of the Distracted*.

Act 1 Scene 1-A Dining Room.

The players sit around the table and glare at Doris (not my real name) ready to hear an enlightening and witty explanation.

Doris: On your turn yo-

Jenny: Shouldn't we just get started, eh?

Doris: I should probably explain the rules first, don't you think?

Jenny: But we can just pick it up. Let's just start.

Fin

Crude writing I know but better than Beckett's *Breath* (I've read that one too). The first time this scene played out I just grinned and carried on, barely distracted by her theatrical exhalations and fairly regular WhatsApps to tell me to get on with it (and, no, the winking emoji doesn't make it better). Now, every time she says,

"Let's just get started, eh?"

It's all I can do to stop myself from exploding in her face.

"How can we just 'get started'? You don't even know the sodding rules!"

Once I even said, 'alright, you go first' and she just sat there and said 'but I don't know how to play' and then *one minute* into my subsequent explanation she said, *I kid you not*, 'Let's just get started, eh?'

I feel like I'm in some perverse Borges story (I've defo read them, they're really short). Help me Ben, you ludological leopard, before I do something with a rule book I regret.

Yours,
Exasperated

A. Dear Exasperated,

All the knowledge in the world is but a folly unless it helps you to survive. I have no time for the weak-willed contagion of literature and your clumsy attempts to appear rounded left me cold. I have been busying myself by committing to memory the various types of fungi that grow around my cabin and just an hour ago I made myself the most delectable mushroom soup. So happy was I with my achievement that the world exploded with colour and the walls began to breathe. This is true knowledge. Making mushroom soup. I recommend the red and white ones, they're scrumptious.

On the problem of your friend, she is just showing enthusiasm. Why attempt to rob her of that? With the attention economy attempting to cocoon us in blue-pilled catatonia a bit of *get up and go* is to be applauded. You simply need to play games that demand no learning of rules beforehand. Then you will see her blossom and your night will be saved.

When I need a light hearted pick me up I always reach for *This War of Mine*. This game tells a wonderful story and demands you read no rules.

If the story of *This War of Mine* leaves you hungry for more narrative

then I strongly suggest the wonderful role playing game, *Ten Candles*. Imagine the scene: scattered bowls of prawn cocktail crisps. The golden glow from the tea lights illuminate your faces as you tell delightful tales of the end of the world. There is no better way to spend an evening than that, and in *Ten Candles* you are directed to make no preparation whatsoever.

I wish I could join you but an acorn full of helium flavoured Angel Delight has just knocked on the door and we have to take his Auntie the whining manatee to spin class.

**With all of my ludological love,
Ben**

Seeking guidance?

Have you got a gaming problem? Want Ben to dish out some ludological wisdom in your direction? Get in touch. Contact with Ben on Twitter [@5games4doomsday](#) or email the editor at christopher.eggett@warnersgroup.co.uk and we'll publish, and answer, the most amusing problems.



THE DOOMED



THE END IS NIGH

We join a kitbashed revolution that feels a few tens of thousands of years in the future, with *The Doomed* Words and Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**



RPG combat?' (the answer: it gets better, quicker and more deadly) and *The Doomed* looks to be the culmination of applying that tight design philosophy to new area of the gaming world. We sat down with Chris to chat about the game's lockdown roots, kitbashing, and making these kind of design decisions.

Hello, would you mind introducing yourself to our readers (again)?

Hi, I'm Chris McDowall, designer of the RPGs *Into the Odd* and *Electric Bastionland*, and now the upcoming miniatures game *The Doomed*.

What is *The Doomed*?

The Doomed is my attempt to bring my RPG design philosophy to the world of skirmish wargames. You'll build a warband of 3-8 hunters, competing with others to rid the

moulded out of clay, and of course the trusty old cardboard standees fighting around bean-can terrain.

Is there a story, a world, and 40,000 pages of lore?

I wanted to hit the sweet spot where there's enough flavour to inspire you to get playing and modelling, but things are open enough that everybody's game will look slightly different. In short, a company came to a planet, bringing ships full of sci-fi technology, but now they've abandoned it. You're left in a muddle of crude and futuristic technology, poorly equipped to take on the growing forces of Doom in the world.

Tell us about wanting to design a wargame in the first place?

The Doomed was born in the first lockdown.



I've been waiting for *The Doomed* to be announced for a very long time. Chris McDowall, creator of *Into the Odd* and *Electric Bastionland* teased that he was working on a wargame for what felt like years, and when Osprey announced that they would be publishing it we knew we were in for something special. McDowall is a game designer who focuses on meaningful actions and crunchy simplicity. *Into the Odd* answered the question of 'what happens if you just remove hit rolls from

world of monstrous horrors. I wanted minimal rules so that I could focus on making each game fast and dramatic.

Wot?! A Wargame?

Yeah! I know that's a scary word, but I've spoken to lots of people who've played my

RPGs and dipped into *The Doomed* as their first wargame. It's amazing to see some of the creativity coming from people who don't already have piles of miniatures. I've seen warbands made with LEGO minifigs, horrors

Desperate for indoor hobbies, I returned to miniatures, gluing guns to knights, swords to robots, claws to everything, and making a bunch of little misfits. There are lots of skirmish wargames out there, but I always want to push things as far toward rules-lite as I can. It started as a very straightforward game of fighting the other player, but I was really taken with the neutral monsters that roamed the battlefield in these early versions, so I experimented with having a single monster be the centrepiece of the scenario, exploring ways they could break the rules of the game. These Horrors ended up being equal parts a puzzle to solve and a threat to manage. ➤

THE DOOMED



Previously we've spoken about a game design concept of yours which is "remove stuff until it breaks, and then add one thing back so it's fun" (or similar). Can you tell us about whether this approach was used in designing this game?

I definitely used that here, eventually leading to the "3 Noes" of the game. No measuring, no stacking, no tracking.

No Measuring means positioning is all about obstacles and line of sight rather than distance.

No Stacking means you only need to remember one modifier for every type of roll. Shooting into cover gives a -1 to hit, and you don't need to remember *anything* else for a shooting roll.

No Tracking means all the nasty effects that happen resolve fully by the end of that unit's turn, so you don't need markers littering the board to show who's pinned, who's frightened, and who's poisoned. All of those things have immediate impact instead.

How does it play? Is there a particular design element you're very chuffed with?

I've said before that having simple rules isn't enough to make a good game. You've got to use the space made by that simplicity to do something interesting. So while everything is very simple, there are lots of little moments that emerge out of the game. The big one is the Shock Table, which you roll whenever a unit gets knocked down by an attack. This has results ranging from "thrown" where they might be launched into some horrible position, to "vengeance" where a nearby unit gets a chance to attack whoever just knocked their ally down. This can lead to some fun chain reactions where a single attack leads to a dramatic snowballing carnage across the battlefield.

How do we win?

Most scenarios will have both a Horror and a Conflict.

Killing the Horror isn't straightforward, as you'll need to destroy the three Nexuses that are binding it to our world. These might just



WHAT IS KITBASHING?

Most of the time in the hobby, when you build a miniature – if you need to at all, most board games simply use resin miniatures – you follow a basic plan. There's instructions and helpful guides, and you're usually sticking arms on to the body and a head somewhere too. Even if you're guessing with where the glue goes, you know how many arms a space marine has.

But Kitbashing is the art of chopping up miniature, using old and leftover bits, and improvising. Creating totally new models from leftover bits and bobs and letting your imagination run wild. Most people start with simple modifications like swapping the heads of their squads, or replacing hands and weapons – but soon it can spiral out into its entire own hobby.

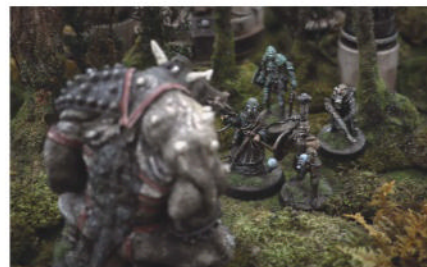
If you're new to model making in the hobby, the idea of cutting things up to make totally new miniatures might seem a bit daunting. Our suggestion is to take a look at BillMakingStuff's YouTube channel so see an irreverent and helpful guide through that part of the hobby.

Head over here to see more:
www.youtube.com/@BillMakingStuff

be stationary targets, but most have their own behaviours. They might be roaming whirlpools that drag in nearby units, or artifacts that the Horror carries around and hurls at their enemies.

The Conflict comes into play if there's another Warband competing with you, and is a side objective happening alongside the horror hunt. This might involve beating your rival to meet with a shady contact, breaking through into their territory, or securing control of towering vantage points across the battlefield.

You can leave out the Conflict for a more straightforward cooperative game, or even leave out the Horror for a full on competitive



skirmish, but I enjoy the chaos of using both, where rival players often end up begrudgingly teaming up against the Horror.

Can we solo it?

Solo compatibility is at the absolute core of this game. There's a really simple procedure for activating units that don't belong to a player, typically the Horrors and their minions, and you can even use this to have a rival warband competing with your own. Every Horror, every Conflict, and the full campaign is solo compatible.

Osprey have put together some interesting Kitbashed miniatures for the game – tell us about this aesthetic – or potential aesthetic for those who haven't been involved in this side of the hobby before?

I wanted the miniatures in the book to inspire people to leap into kitbashing, so getting Ana Polanščak from Gardens of Hecate on board was an absolute dream. The whole world is built around the idea that if you have a miniature, there's probably a place for them somewhere in this world, though they'll fit in even better if you swap in a new head and maybe an arm or two. The Inq28 and Blanchitsu styles were of course a huge influence, but above all I wanted it to feel like you had a whole world of modelling options for both the warbands and the horrors. My own bits box is sorted into three compartments: historical-ish, sci-fi-ish, and monster-ish, and my favourite creations for the Doomed pull from all three flavours.

What's next for *The Doomed*, and you?

With 36 Horrors, 36 Conflicts, and a whole campaign system built into the game, I'm very happy with the amount of content *The Doomed* is packing on release!

I'm working hard on my next RPG, a game called *Mythic Bastionland* which is set in the not-quite-history and not-quite-myth of the world of Into the Odd.

The Doomed will hit retailers in June 2023. 🎮

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WHAT'S IN A GAME? DO NOT PASS GO

We all know games are good for us, but in what way? Each month Tim Clare untangles the science and philosophy behind what makes games good

Words by **Tim Clare**

I was speaking to game historian and designer David Parlett when he recounted something the late game inventor Alex Rudolph once told him: 'Chess is the greatest game mankind has invented. Go is the greatest game mankind has discovered.'

The implication is that there is something fundamental, something almost *inevitable*, about the emergence of ancient area-control game Go – as if it existed before us, and was just waiting to bubble up out of reality.

Clearly this is an expression of a poetic truth rather than hard-nosed archaeology – chess itself, like most traditional games, evolved and spread via various transmission vectors before solidifying into the form we recognise today – but it speaks to Go's simplicity, depth and extraordinary longevity.

Given Go's pedigree, it's hard not to feel like a bit of an oik admitting that you don't really enjoy it. And I don't – the problem with games with a high skill ceiling (and Go might have one of the highest, unless you consider Snakes & Ladders a dexterity game) is that, if you're not good at them and you don't have a skilled mentor to ease you into it, a lot of the time your play experience is one of baffled failure as you take a protracted drubbing. I recognise intellectually that it's a rich and beautiful ludic territory, but for now its wonders remain, for me, theoretical.

If you're unfamiliar with Go, suffice to say for our purposes today that it's a two-player game of placing stones or beads on a grid to form closed-off areas you score at the end of the game. Its simplicity and ubiquity along with its reputation as a cerebral, meditative pursuit adjacent to Taoist or Zen traditions of deep focus have made it an object of study for researchers. Might Go, in all its stripped-down, minimalist splendour, offer benefits beyond your friends thinking you're really smart and cultured if they see you playing it?

One 2014 Korean study looked at children managing ADHD, and how they responded to a course of two hours of Go a day, five days a week, for sixteen weeks. Researchers recorded ADHD symptoms, cognitive ability, and took EEG readings before and after the course. The tests the children were given involved tasks like remembering sequences of numbers then repeating them forwards and backwards.

At the end of the sixteen weeks, children who underwent the training programme showed a decrease in ADHD symptoms relating to executive function and concentration, and performed better in tests of memory. This isn't to say that they were

suddenly neurotypical – their hyperactivity scores, for example, remained unchanged – but, according to the researchers, the programme seemed to improve their capacity for sustained focus.

A Chinese study of 147 patients with Alzheimer's assessed them before and after six months of regular play at a Go club. None of the participants had ever played the game before. At the end of the test period, researchers found that the Go players scored significantly lower on scales of depression and hospital-related anxiety than when they began, and showed significant improvement in general function.

Now, there are some reasons to be cautious before overgeneralising these results: for a start, the above study excluded anyone who reported that they didn't like Go. So we don't know what sort of effects we'd see in people who really can't stand it. A third of the patients in the study played for two hours daily, which pretty gruelling for a game you find about as much fun as scrubbing the mould off your grouting.

Secondly, the control group in the above study received no treatment at all. When the Go group were meeting people, chatting, socialising, etc, the others were, well – potentially doing nothing. So this study – and the Korean study – might just be discovering that





people thrive and can think better when they socialise regularly and get plenty of positive attention.

This is an issue that a lot of research into the benefits of tabletop games runs into – the question of which parts of the intervention are necessary. It's like conducting a study where patients with a sprained ankle have ice applied to the affected area while they wear a large novelty fedora. If you don't also test what happens with just ice and just a hat, you might erroneously conclude that massive fedoras significantly reduce swelling.

There's also a bias among funders, researchers and publications towards finding positive associations with national games. Thus, in South East Asia, we get lots of positive studies about Go. In the UK, Europe and Russia, there have been lots of studies praising Chess. This

doesn't necessarily mean that the effects we've found are illusory, but we have little data on whether they're exclusive. Researchers are unlikely any time soon to recruit over a hundred participants to spend six

months investigating whether you can achieve similar results with *Munchkin*.

Fortunately, for our purposes, we don't have to conclusively prove the supremacy of Go one way or another. It's true that studies have found joining social clubs or participation in sporting programmes can improve mood, and the symptoms of Alzheimer's or ADHD, so Go certainly doesn't have some special, mystic power we can't find elsewhere.

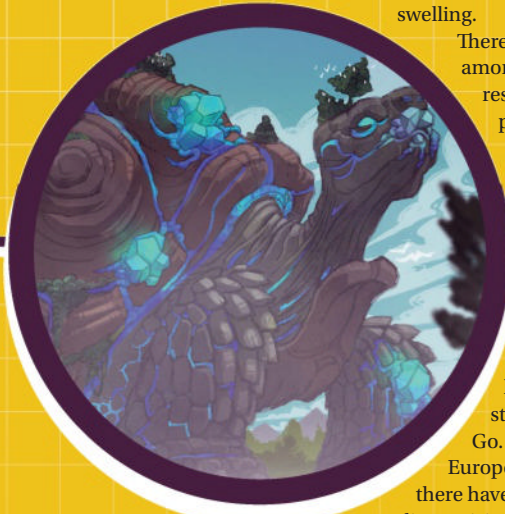
We know just from talking to people who play games like Go – communal games, which require sustained concentration – that they can offer a variety of pleasures. For some, it's nice to be able spend time in company without feeling the pressure to talk. A game like Go, after all, *is* a conversation. We ask questions and offer replies with every stone we place, and, in doing so, we collaborate on a story.

In this way, Go can be an exercise in mutual appreciation – the smile and nod that arise when your opponent makes a shrewd move. This, again, is by no means exclusive to Go, nor even to games of strict skill – we can all applaud or commiserate at a particularly good or bad piece of luck.

There's certainly a level of structural complexity in Go that is rare in other games, and researchers have studied players' brains in fMRI scanners while they make moves to get a sense of what areas of the brain might be recruited (somewhat inconclusively, it has to be said – unsurprisingly a lot of different parts of our brain show activation when we're doing something as complex as playing a game).

Some of our current models of memory and focus conceive of our cognitive ability as fuel tank which we draw from during the day and which gets refilled when we rest. Conditions like Alzheimer's and ADHD figuratively put leaks in the fuel tank or hook it up to a powerful but inefficient engine. Practising games like Go in low-distraction environments may help compensate by expanding our fuel capacity.

Aside from this, the other upsides Go offers may be common to participating in a supportive, accepting community. Mental stimulation, emotional bonding and the stress buffers that come from the support of peers are all benefits we can get from a variety of sources. It's a truism, but games are only as good as the people we play them with. ♡



“ Chess is the greatest game mankind has invented. Go is the greatest game mankind has discovered – Alex Rudolph ”



REGENCY CTHULHU

PRIDE, PREJUDICE AND UNFATHOMABLE COSMIC HORROR

There's only one thing that's more terrifying than the endless but not empty abyss at the heart of the Cthulhu mythos... and that's saying the wrong thing to the wrong person at a high-stakes, high society ball in the 1800s. Welcome, then, to *Regency Cthulhu*, a game that we spoke to Lynn Hardy and Mike Mason about at Dragonmeet 2021, which will finally be arriving on our shelves later this year. The PDF is available right now, and in usual Chaosium fashion, you can order the physical book and get the digital version free right away.

Of course, you're not really in character if you're using a tablet at your table, and indeed, if you're sitting in mixed couple of unmarried people. The world of Jane Austen is a socially vicious one that sets us up for a whole host of potential roleplaying frictions – all while trying to uncover the usual cosmic horrors we're used to seeing in *Call of Cthulhu*.

We sat down with the game's writers, Lynn Hardy and Andrew Peregrine to discuss what makes this trip into the world of Cthulhu-themed horror so intriguing...

Hello! Would you mind introducing yourselves?

Lynne Hardy: My name is Lynne Hardy, and I'm the Associate Editor for *Call of Cthulhu* at Chaosium. I'm also the line editor for the recently released *Rivers of London: the Roleplaying Game*.

Andrew Peregrine: I'm Andrew Peregrine, and I'm a freelance writer for role playing games, which for me is technically a side hustle that has gotten completely out of hand. My official job is as a lighting technician at the Theatre Royal



published under my own name rather than anonymously—as was usually the case for women authors if they wanted to avoid a scandal—but I’m definitely one of those terrible Blue Stockings who believe in women’s education. Although I do, on occasion, also teach traditional embroidery techniques, so I suppose I may be just a little bit acceptably “accomplished,” at least as far as the Regency era is concerned.

ever regaining power, and the Prince Regent became King George IV in January, 1820.

If you’re familiar with Jane Austen’s books, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, you pretty much know what to expect—balls, promenades, matchmaking, and other social intrigues, with an added sanity-shredding Mythos twist. In real terms, what you can expect is an introduction to the era, which takes you through the historical



The genteel world of unspeakable horrors we’re all used to is about to be shocked to its core with the vicious social hierarchy of the 1800s in: Regency Cthulhu

Words and Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

Haymarket in London’s West End. I’m currently the lead developer for *Dune: Adventures in the Imperium* from Modiphius and also developing some of the *My Little Pony* line for Renegade. *Regency Cthulhu* is my first project for Chaosium, but it has been a dream of mine for some time to work on an official Cthulhu product for them.

And would that be appropriate given the period in which Regency Cthulhu is set, Lynn?

LH: Totally not! Not only have I

“If” I knew nothing about the historical period, how would you prime me for this setting?

LH: The supplement is set during the actual Regency, the period between 1811 and 1820 when George, Prince of Wales, was made Prince Regent by an Act of Parliament so he could take over official royal duties from his father King George III—hence the era’s name. George III’s previous bout of mental illness almost caused a Regency some twenty or so years earlier, as depicted in Alan Bennett’s play *The Madness of George III*, but that time he recovered. Sadly, this time, he died without

setting; a chapter discussing how to create period appropriate investigators, as well as some new rules; the fictional town of Tarryford in Wiltshire, to use as a base for your Mythos investigations; two scenarios to introduce your players and their investigators to Tarryford, its inhabitants, and its secrets; and a smattering of appendices that contain additional support information, including a costume glossary and Tarryford 100 years after the events portrayed in the scenarios, in case the Keeper wishes to continue the story into the 1900s.

AP: If you’re not, the best option would be to just go and watch one of the legion of movies and series based on Jane Austen’s work. While few of them actually capture her biting satire and elegant writing, they will absolutely give you the gist. Reading any Jane Austen novel is the ideal though. But if we were playing tonight and I was driving you to the game, I’d first introduce it as an exercise in manners and good behaviour. For your characters, who are at the high end of Regency society, life is all about ➤

REGENCY CTHULHU

doing the 'correct thing', although this isn't always the right thing. Society is beset with a legion of rules and etiquette governing what is polite and appropriate. Many of them are arcane and byzantine, and all designed to keep out interlopers. So, while there may be eldritch monsters from beyond time seeking to drive you insane, as long as you can remember which is the correct fork to use at lunch you are all good.

What made you want to go here with this book?

LH: While there is a lot more going on in the Regency period than the world portrayed by Jane Austen, I grew up watching BBC adaptations and listening to audiobooks of her works, and they were always something I enjoyed. When I was a little older, I read the books for myself and came to fully appreciate how clever, witty, and revealing they were about the time

she lived in. I also took part in two Regency-based LARPs many years ago, one inspired by Jane Austen and the other by Mary Shelley, and they were both a great deal of fun, so I knew the setting was ripe for a *Call of Cthulhu* supplement!

AP: For some years, I've run a *Call of Cthulhu* game for my group on my friend James' birthday which happens to be on Halloween. James picks the setting and we do a one night adventure. So *Cthulhu* has very much become our 'special occasion pick-up game'. One year we were all holidaying in a Regency house and so everyone wanted to play a Regency Cthulhu game. As it happened I'd been researching the era for another game I've been working on for years called 'Manners and Monstrosities'. So we played the scenario that would become 'The Long Corridor' mainly as the house we were in had just that arrangement of corridors. Thankfully both remained the same length for the holiday.

With a collection of these adventures in hand I realised I should do something with them, and so I pitched them to Chaosium. Lynne, being a huge Jane Austen fan, got very excited about the idea and convinced Mike (Mason) to make it much more than just a single adventure. I expanded on the setting and background detail, as well as developing the town of Tarryford and added another adventure. Then Lynne took hold of it, rebuilt reputation and added a whole ocean full of more cool stuff I'd forgotten.

Are we doing 'interesting gender stuff' with this historical CoC outing? I'm thinking there's these very gendered sets of spaces in the Austen novels that run in parallel [or intermingle] with the public/private spaces. How does this play out?

LH: The actual Regency period was very stratified, both in terms of gender roles and a person's place in society. One's social

class and status was usually dictated by one's ethnicity, job, or by how much money you'd inherited if you were at the top end of the scale, i.e., a member of the gentry or aristocracy. You could make money in trade, of course, but that was also looked down on by the great and good. Women in the lower classes certainly worked—they had to for their families to survive—but the women at the top of the social order were pretty much expected to produce heirs and be decorative. Women like Austen who attempted to have a career usually had to do so in secret if they didn't want to bring shame on themselves and their families. Only truly wealthy women—usually widows—had some leeway in this respect, as they were regarded as “eccentric” rather than dangerous transgressors of societal norms.

Exploring some of that stratification in the game can be interesting—it certainly means players have to get creative when it comes to working around social expectations while combatting the Mythos. In terms of the spaces—well, being able to disappear off behind closed doors with those of your class and gender or being permitted to do the social rounds so you can catch up on the latest gossip is a great way to get information, the lifeblood of any scenario. Regency society thrived on gossip and tittle-tattle, so it's a great way to seed clues to characters who may not be able to go tramping about the countryside interrogating witnesses.

AP: The other thing about the sexual segregation that went on is that (for a change) it made gay relationships a little easier. Men who spent time together were just ‘enjoying the bachelor life’ and women might often share a room and even a bed with a close friend. Of course they will still be pressured to marry and certainly not the person they are in love with. So there is a source of fun and tragedy in all such relationships, which makes for good story.

LH: We didn't want the era's gender roles—or any of its other social mores—to limit the kinds of stories the Keeper and their players could tell together. So, while we provide the Keeper with the information they need to know about what a woman's role in upper class society was, we also suggest that they take a few liberties with historical accuracy in order to make the game as diverse and inclusive as possible. How many liberties depends on the group involved, and we encourage Keepers to talk about that with their players so everyone is on the same page once the game begins. Having some players think they're playing *Pride and Prejudice* while others think they're playing *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is going to cause an issue!



We have a new Reputation system to muck about with, how do we go about ruining what little reputation we currently have?

LH: Oh, that's easy! Dress inappropriately, flirt outrageously in public, get caught with members of the opposite sex without a chaperone, cheat at cards, behave drunkenly and licentiously, default on your creditors, then flee the country!

AP: Reputation is vital. It is very common for PCs to try and break the rules, or insist they don't apply to them as they are mavericks. But in *Regency Cthulhu*, that sort of attitude will quickly have them thrown out of society. If you

want to investigate you will have to be able to talk to people and go to the right occasions. Anarchists and mavericks are not respected for their daring, but ostracised for their rudeness.

But reputation is all about what you are seen to do, not what you actually do. As long as you can hide the truth for long enough, you can get away with a lot. In fact, society will turn a blind eye to a lot of scandal where it can, especially if they might get caught in it. So this adds an extra layer to investigation, trying to make sure you talk to people the right way or approach things with the correct etiquette as well as finding the clues. ➤

REGENCY CTHULHU

Is the horror of the game the vicious social hierarchy present in the era? Or are there monsters too?

AP: Both! There is a lot you can do without introducing monsters at all. *Regency Cthulhu* gives you the tools to run a straight Jane Austen game if you are so inclined, without the mythos getting involved. But the horror works very well here because of the rules. If you can't scream for fear of causing a scene, or try to find your missing brother because setting out right now would be inappropriate, the horror only grows.

LH: The social hierarchy certainly provides challenges and horrors, especially if your investigator is an intelligent woman who has no desire to be married off, but there are monsters, too. As we know from other historical *Call of Cthulhu* settings, the Mythos and its supporters get everywhere. And given the amount of secrecy and saving face in the Regency, the Mythos has a lot of places it can hide.

What are the included scenarios like?

LH: The first scenario is "The Long Corridor." In the grand Regency tradition, it begins at a ball, where the behaviour of the host's daughter attracts the investigators' attention. From there, they discover an unusual architectural feature that leads them further into the mystery. It was designed to introduce players to the Regency era, the town of Tarryford, and its notable citizens. It's reasonably short—I say "reasonably" because, while it should only take one to two sessions to

play through, our playtesters had so much fun with the social interaction side of things that it took them far longer!

The second scenario is "The Emptiness Within," which takes place a year after the events of "The Long Corridor." A brother and sister arrive in Tarryford from Italy to take over their late father's estate, just as the town's citizens start suffering from a mysterious sleeping sickness. The investigators need to delve into Tarryford's murky past to see if they can find a solution before the whole town falls sick. This is a longer and more complex scenario, designed to stretch the investigators and have them interacting with people from all social levels—from the absolute poorest all the way up to the aristocracy.

Your top three tips for being a regency investigator?

LH: Always be well dressed, mind your Ps and Qs, and always have a duelling pistol and a sharp knife in your reticule.

Does this seem like an ongoing line for *Call of Cthulhu*?

AP: It certainly could be, but I don't believe there are any plans at the moment. It would certainly be worthwhile taking a look at the 'Sharpe' side of the era and the Napoleonic wars. But the community has already dived into the setting and there are already several excellent adventures to be found there. It is one of my

favorite things about being a game writer that what I get to make can inspire such awesome stuff in other people. It's great to see people taking the setting and running with it in some amazing directions I'd never have thought of.

And what's next for you personally?

LH: My focus is currently shifting from *Call of Cthulhu* now that *Rivers of London: the Roleplaying Game* is out. I'll still be involved (at the moment I'm editing a mini campaign) but there's a lot of work to do to make sure *Rivers* has the player support it needs to make it into a vibrant, thriving line.

AP: At the moment we have a new book for *Dune* on the way and more in production as we speak. I'm looking forward to seeing the *My Little Pony* corebook out, and I'm working on more books for that in development too. I've also got some work coming out for two of my other favourite games, *Vampire* and *7th Sea* and there is usually some more *Doctor Who* books to keep an eye out for. But it's been great to work on *Regency Cthulhu* and I'd love to do more for *Chaosium*. I've already pitched them a modern day campaign book, so hopefully I'll have a chance to get working on that too sometime.

And finally, please complete this phrase I've just come up with all by myself: "It is a truth universally acknowledged..."?

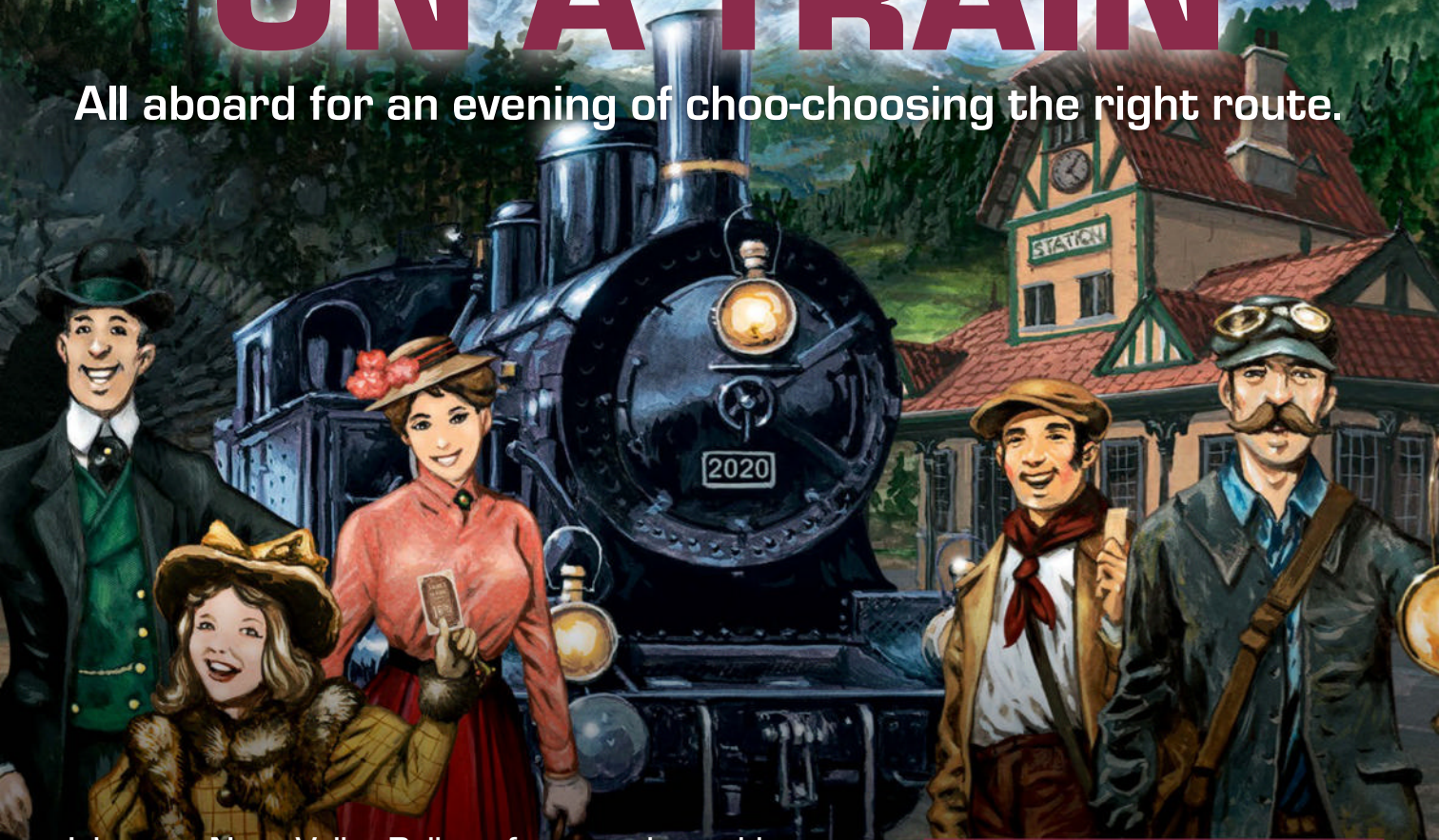
LH: "... that a single Keeper, in possession of a new setting, must be in want of some players." ♣



EVENT

TICKET TO RIDE ON A TRAIN

All aboard for an evening of choo-choosing the right route.



Join us at Nene Valley Railway for a two-hour ride on a heritage steam train, and play some games too. Leaving from Wansford Station, Peterborough, the train will travel in both directions through the countryside, offering views and the excitement of rail travel.

And if you don't want to play **Ticket To Ride**, or even a game about trains, we'll forgive you for going off track. Bring your own games to the event if you wish, or none at all if you just want to enjoy a ride on a classic engine.



FIND OUT MORE HERE:
www.ttgami.ng/nene-valley

UNDERMINED

The Wild West can be a weird place. There's a phrase which is 'sell the shovels' which comes from the gold rush in the 1840s and 1850s in America. The phrase means that you're better off selling what people need during a boom time, rather than trying to strike it lucky. Sure, you won't be rich beyond your wildest dreams from blowing open the side of a mountain with an inadvisable amount of dynamite, but you'll be richer than everyone who didn't. And you should probably sell dynamite too.

Undermined: Paradise City is not a game of selling shovels. Instead, players are taking the risk of digging up gold from 'them there hills' and in doing so, putting themselves and their potential profit at risk. Over the course of the game they'll be making their mining set up better, and therefore improving their chances of hitting the sparkling jackpot. And of course, as players grow stronger the temptation to get in one another's way is going to become harder to resist. There is an element of helping one another too, but as the game goes on in the race for the game-ending number of victory points, helping one another will seem a whole lot less attractive.

But what called to us at Tabletop Gaming Live 2022 was the slightly odd artwork. With a style that's got a kind of absurd satirical edge to it, the look of the game offers occasional surreal moments. Usually when something gets a little abstracted. Once we sat down however, we found a fun little game that is worth our attention beyond its good looks.

We sat down to talk to Chris Fisher and Nick Barker of Devil Fly Games about *Undermined* and their upcoming crowdfunding campaign for it.

Can you introduce yourself to our readers?

We're Chris and Nick, long-time friends and gamers that grew up together playing video games, board games and role-playing games! We met in secondary school during a games (outdoor games that is) lesson and instantly hit it off.

What is *Undermined*?

Undermined is an engine building game themed around mining in the American Frontier. Players are rival miners during the gold rush, competing to unearth the greatest treasures from the rich mines of Pairadice city.

What that means for the players is that they

will be using items, such as pick axes, safety gear and some other wackier tools, and rolling dice to 'dig' through a deck of rock cards, competing to earn enough treasures to win the game.

Players can help or hinder one another using items and event cards, in what we describe as 'semi-collaborative' gameplay. This has worked really well during our playtests, with players often helping each other out in the early game, then becoming more antagonistic as the game gets close to its conclusion.

What's the core loop? How do we play?

A turn in *Undermined* starts with gaining resources before going shopping, preparing to go down the mine and finally using your equipment to mine, unearthing treasures and avoiding perils! When mining, the top card in the rock deck represents the rock you are attempting to break, and has a number on it representing how tough it is. You attempt to mine by rolling two dice and adding bonuses from equipment. If the result equals or beats the toughness of the rock card then you've broken it! If broken, the rock card is flipped and it will either give you an immediate bonus or tell you to reveal a card from the treasures and perils deck.

THERE'S GOLD IN THEM THERE HILLS



We take a gamble on this new push-your-luck-meets-engine-building card game, and we think you should too

Words and Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

The treasures and perils deck contains treasures such as shiny gems or ancient fossils that players must collect to win. However, mining isn't the safest profession, and you may trigger a peril like a cave-in or a flooded tunnel. Perils can cost players money, items or even their treasures if they aren't careful. If you are lucky enough to get a treasure, you are that much closer to winning! Treasures have a victory point value, but they can also be sold for money, so you can either hold onto your treasures and risk it all for victory or you can sell the treasures to fund future expeditions, making them safer or more lucrative.

As we mentioned we've got a range of items to mine from stronger and shinier pick-axes to bigger and better explosives. The pick-axes last multiple mine attempts before breaking but explosives are more risky and potentially more rewarding. Explosives are single ➤

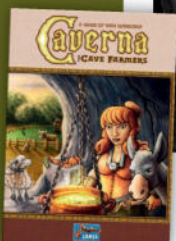


THREE MINING CLASSICS

Love digging for victory? Here's three mining-themed classics that are like striking gold

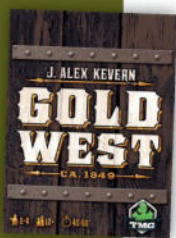
CAVERNA: THE CAVE FARMERS

This reimagining of the all-time classic *Agricola* takes us out of the farms, but doesn't stop us being farmers. A classic worker placement game of cultivating the forest in front of your underground home and digging deeper into the mountain.



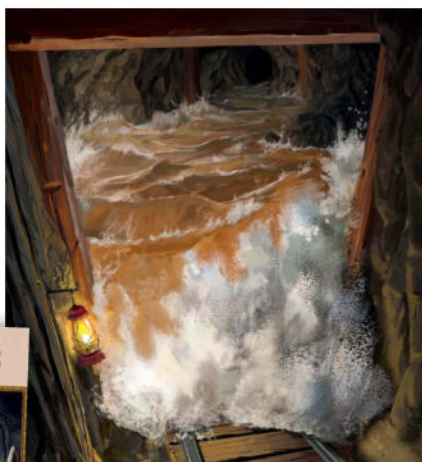
GOLD WEST

More closely aligned with the themes of *Undermined*, *Gold West* sees players play the role of prospectors building their mining empires while vying over the valuable metals beneath their feet. Build your empire and decide whether to rush your product out quickly, or spend time refining it for bigger points.



TINNERS TRAIL

Copper mining in 19th century Cornwall – it doesn't get sexier than that. A game of strategically balancing your investment in the mine, and turning it into profit – rather than a profit sink.



games we had played recently, and the rules we had added or wished the designers had thought of that made the experience slightly fairer or more fun. We decided that we should put our money where our mouths are, and try our own hand at designing a game.

We agreed to meet back in two weeks with three game concepts each ready to discuss. Incredibly, we both had a mining themed game as number one on our list, using a mechanic of rolling dice to try and 'break' rock cards, which would then reveal a reward. I don't think we ever got around to discussing our other ideas.

We have really strived for the game to remain simple with hidden strategic depths, so that has formed a lot of the direction of the design. Our guide throughout has been "can we explain the game to new players and start playing within two minutes." This lead us to an engine builder game, which tends to build up in complexity naturally as play progresses, allowing play to start quickly and complexity build up without the players getting overwhelmed.

I think the 'push your luck' element really speaks to our own personalities and what we enjoy in gaming – those big all or nothing moments, where the whole table sits up and watches the action with their breath held.

Let's talk about the art – some of it surreal, some of it fairly straight – tell us about the art direction and some of your favourite pieces?

The art couldn't be more perfect in my opinion. Once the theme and mechanics were set, we had a very clear idea of how we wanted to present the art, as this can often



make a person's decision when looking to buy a game. We all say we shouldn't judge books (or games) by their cover but we all do, so we wanted something that was great to look at and caught your eye.

We intentionally stayed away from a style that was too cartoony or zany and while elements of this are present, we made a conscious decision to use a relatively realistic style but embed humour throughout the art in both obvious and subtle ways. The realistic approach provides a real contrast to the more surreal pieces to make them stand out more but also ensure they don't feel out of place. I think this is the main strength and allows people to appreciate the excellent artwork (huge shoutout to Patrice Rameau, the artist) for its quality but also to enjoy the fun details and jokes that are scattered throughout. We've also looked to sprinkle some continuity across the art so the more people play and the more art they see, the more they will pick up on during later playthroughs!

Favourite pieces is a really tough one! The Flooded Tunnel and the Psychic are definitely up there as they are the first pieces we saw, but I really love the canary. This is one of the more cartoony ones and it tells such a story. That Canary knows it's purpose and the look on its face is tired resignation. We also really enjoyed Kleptomania – we sent a description of the piece to Patrice, and when it came back it was so perfect, we both laughed out loud!

How has the feedback been so far?

Overwhelmingly positive! We've had a booth at UK Games Expo, Tabletop Gaming Live and Dragonmeet this year, where we have been very busy running playtests for the public (and giving out as many Devil Fly Games stickers

use items with the power to mine through multiple rocks at once, which may lead to a very good turn or a very bad one! We also have Event cards which can interrupt players or affect the game in fun and different ways!

Play continues until one player has unearthed 12 victory points worth of treasures, but we encourage players to adjust this up or down if they want to make their games longer or shorter.

Tell us about developing the game, the mix of push your luck and engine builder – where did that idea come from?

This is one of my favourite stories to tell. Nick and I were having a drink after work, discussing



as we can), and we were really humbled by the number of people who had nice things to say about the game. From families to groups of friends, and seasoned gamers to those relatively new to the hobby, everyone found something to enjoy. I think this has been one of the most satisfying aspects of demoing the game, and we're feeling like we really have achieved our mission statement of designing a game that can be for everyone.

However, my most memorable moment came in one of our very early playtests. We had set up a camera in my games room, and watched from another room while a group of our friends

played a blind test of one of our prototypes. We gave them the 'boxed' game and a rules printout, then watched how they got on. Initially, they were very aware they were being watched, but they soon forgot as they got into the game. At one point a player physically jumped out of their seat and cheered when they made a big roll using an explosive item, and Nick and I looked at each other and new we had something!

What's next for you all as designers and for Devilfly?

We've got some ideas for some *Undermined* expansions to explore some

different settings and mechanics. We've also written and are just about to start playtesting a Tabletop Roleplaying Game set in the world of *Mortal's Reckoning*, which is a dark, ancient Greece inspired fantasy world created by Benjamin Lycett who has an extensive miniature range out already (go check them out!). As if that all wasn't enough, we're in the planning stages of another game that's a bit different to *Undermined* So watch this space for news on that front too. However, first thing's first, we're super keen to make *Undermined* as big a success as we can. 🍀

2013



A Good All-Round Year for Gaming

Words by **Matthew Vernal**

It's not every year where we can look back on so many wonderful moments in the UK. Andy Murray would win Wimbledon (the first male athlete to do so for UK since 1936), the same sex marriage law finally passed, ensuring any couple in love could be legally married by 2014 and Edinburgh-based video game developers Rockstar North would release the highest grossing video game of all time, *Grand Theft Auto 5*, sitting pretty at over £5 Billion in total worldwide revenue.

Alas, whilst none of the board games or companies discussed this month hail from Ol' Blighty, we still have many fantastic games to thank this year for, join us as we look back at 2013!

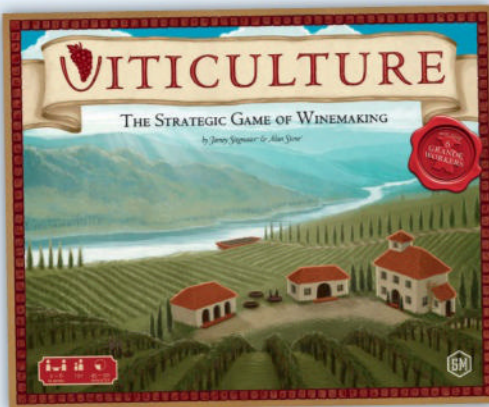


STONEMAIER GAMES FOUNDED

Of the many tabletop games companies to be founded in the last decade, few stand as tall with such an impressive line-up of titles quite like *Stonemaier Games*.

Named after a portmanteau of the company's co-founders Jamey Stegmaier and Alan Stone, *Stonemaier Games* are an independent game publisher who, in their own words, "strive to bring joy to tabletops worldwide through memorable, beautiful, fun games."

It was whilst playtesting their first title *Viticulture* (a worker placement game of operating a rustic vineyard) that Jamey first met Alan, finding a kindred soul who was happy to give constructive feedback on not just the games, but on which directions to steer the company as well.



Viticulture raised enough funds to qualify for its Kickstarter cash in just two weeks and released to moderate success, with many reviewers speaking highly of it and enough sales generated to lead to future projects. The first game spoke a lot to the company's goals, creating intuitive core mechanics that would start small and build in complexity as the game progressed.

The next few releases continued to build *Stonemaier's* reputation, but it wasn't until 2016's *Scythe* that they exploded in popularity, with its Kickstarter raising over half a million dollars (the project finished 1977% funded!) following up with the massively popular *Wingspan* in 2019.

Despite many blockbuster releases, Jamey has been adamant about keeping to their independent roots, showing how sometimes the key to success is passion for your craft and putting your faith in the right people.

ISTANBUL

They say good things come to those who wait and it's certainly the case for German game designer Rüdiger Dorn, who had previously had six games nominated for a Spiel Des Jahres award, but it wasn't until his family-friendly race for rubies through the streets of *Istanbul* that one of his titles would finally win the award.



The game sees players laying out the businesses of Renaissance Era Istanbul in a 4x4 grid, spending each turn moving from place to place, dropping off assistants as they grab money and supplies needed to trade for the highly coveted rubies. The game's main challenge being that, as players slowly run out of assistants, they must double back to places they've already visited. Add that to the penalty spent if you bump into another player with rubies getting steadily more expensive and you have a brilliant fusion of worker placement meets Supermarket Sweep.

The accessible and replayable nature of the game's design won the hearts of many players upon release, with the base game receiving two expansions and now available as a complete set in the Big Box Edition.

The game system has also had two spin-off titles, with a Dice Game variant released in 2017 and a "Choose and Write" edition being released this year.

➔ We're coming to the final ten years of our little walk through the last



PARTY GAMES QUICKFIRE ROUND

So many party games, so little space to mention them all, so let's keep things snappy as we catch some of the highlights!

Coup, the pseudo-spin off to *The Resistance* that delivers an equally snappy social deduction game, sees each player secretly possessing two cards, leaving them free to declare any of the various cards to gain power or eliminate other players, but risk losing themselves if anyone should challenge them on actually possessing the card at all.

Mascarade, a similar game of hidden roles with the added spice that your own role could be swapped around and hidden from you, as up to a whopping 13 players scratch their heads to keep track of who's who in this game of masked identities clamouring for gold.

Two Rooms and a Boom! finds the best way to mix big groups and even bigger lies, with up to 30 players being secretly dealt a role card, with blue team seeking to locate and protect the president player, whilst reds attempt to sneak a bomber into the same room as them after a series of hostage swaps. With grey neutral players seeking wholly different objectives and the entire game being made available for print and play, endless laughs and shouting can be found at an affordable price.

Welcome to *the Dungeon* is the fantasy themed equivalent of daring your friends to go into somewhere they really shouldn't, full of bravado and bluffing with most rounds ending in laughter as some poor adventurer gets completely battered, joyous.

Lastly we have *Sushi Go!* The most intuitive card drafting game that mimics a tiny conveyor belt of tasty morsels passing from player to player, each turn you select one snack, scoring points at round end by grabbing specific quantities of food. Still one of

the best entry level drafting games around with its big box brother, *Sushi Go Party*, expanding the core mechanics for up to eight players to enjoy at once.

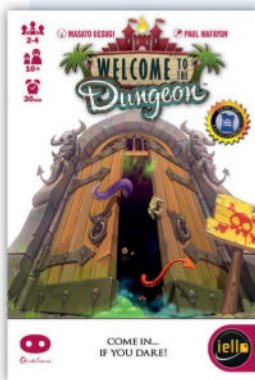


CONCORDIA AND CAVERNA

2013 was a very good year for worker placement titles, as two veteran game designers released some of their finest works, with both titles not only selling well, but still holding a high rank in BGG's Top 50 Titles.

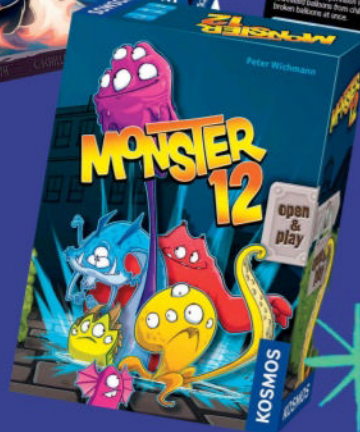
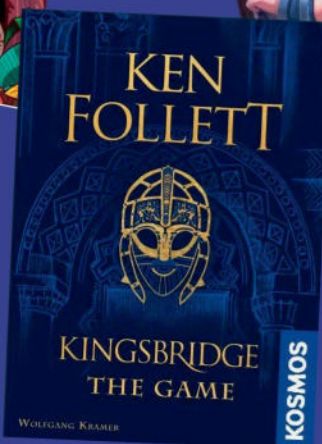
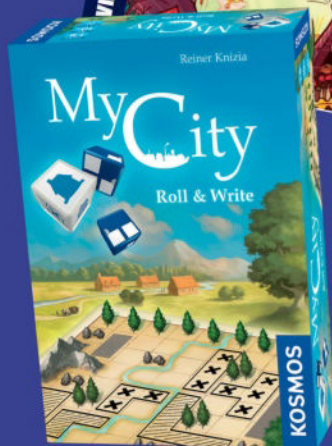
Concordia by Mac Gerdts is an elegantly straightforward eurogame that sees players expanding the trade networks of the Roman Empire through an ingenious card-based action system. Each turn players play a card to either spread out across Europe, build trading posts, gather resources or sell them to buy new cards. Each card has different actions as well as a different patron god that rewards victory points on specific goals, encouraging specialisation to maximise on points. *Concordia* has been blessed with numerous maps, a standalone expansion that introduced team play and a solo mode expansion released in 2021, an ideal time for players wanting to enjoy this Classical Era classic.

From minimalist to maximalist, we have *Caverna*, Uwe Rosenberg's spiritual sequel to *Agricola* that decided more is more and by goodness could it provide more! Now players could clear away woodlands to expand their farms and dig deep into the mountains to build a network of craftsmen, miners and dwarven adventurers. The game showered players with cards, game titles and a rainbow of wooden resource tokens, revelling in its brain bursting, table straining excess. Many fans of the predecessor would go on to declare *Caverna* their preferred way to play this style of almost "sandbox worker placement" gameplay Rosenberg has become synonymous with. Much like its predecessor, the game has seen several expansions, its most recent of which released last year, introducing hostile invaders that you now had to defend your dwarven hold from!



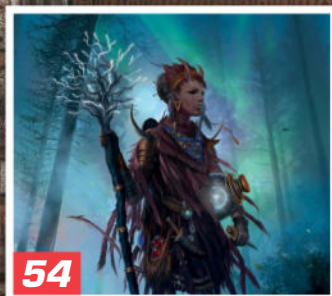
SPRING ARRIVALS

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KOSMOS

PLAYLIST



54



66



72

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 54 FROSTHAVEN | 71 CRUSADERS: THY WILL BE DONE |
| 56 EVERGREEN | 72 NAMIIJI |
| 57 DARK VENTURE: BATTLE OF THE ANCIENTS | 73 YOSEMITE |
| 58 EVERYBODY WINS | 74 COOKING CUSTOMERS |
| 59 PUZZLE STRIKE II | 74 HIVE MIND |
| 60 TIME OF EMPIRES | 75 TERRACOTTA ARMY |
| 62 BEER & BREAD | 76 LONGBOARD |
| 63 ECO: CORAL REEF | 77 PUNS OF ANARCHY |
| 64 CASTLE PANIC: BIG BOX | 77 NAASI: A COYOTE & CROW DICE GAME |
| 65 THE GUARDIANS OF HAVERSACK | 78 BASILICA |
| 66 STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS | 79 WRECKLAND RUN |
| 67 SLUGBLASTER | 80 DEADLY DINNER: KILLING WOODSTOCK |
| 68 SANDWICH MASTERS | 81 ISLE OF IXX |
| 69 DOM PIERRE | 82 AUTOBAHN |
| 70 DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: WARRIORS OF KRYNN | 83 GRAN MECCANISMO |
| | 84 MISTS OVER CARCASSONNE |

SHOULD YOU PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY | YES | MAYBE | NO

FROSTHAVEN

The cold doesn't bother me anyway!

Designer: Isaac Childres | **Publisher:** Cephalofair Games



The follow-up to the immensely successful legacy dungeon crawler *Gloomhaven*, *Frosthaven* is, perhaps, one of the most anticipated board game releases, so the expectations for the game were, naturally, sky high. It must be just like *Gloomhaven*, only better, with more things to do, more stories and more decisions with consequences! It must have more monsters, but also bring back some of the old ones, and more cool boss fights, please! But less Oozes because Oozes are the worst! (Spoilers: Oozes make their return; they are just as happy to be endlessly multiplying in *Frosthaven*'s cold) Also more characters! With different abilities! And powers! And items! And more classes! And playstyles! And more map stickers! And more secret envelopes and boxes to unlock! MORE! Oh, and can it be in a smaller box that doesn't need weightlifting training to pick up, please and thank you.

It would be impossible to satisfy all these requests while delivering a game that is functional and fits into this physical dimension. Yet that didn't seem to stop the game's designer, Isaac Childres. His love for this universe is palpable in all aspects of the gameplay, and, perhaps, is one of the reasons the game goes above and beyond expectations. This doesn't mean *Frosthaven* is perfect – no game of such size and scope can get away without some oddities or clumsiness – however it is also a sequel that matches the ambition of the original and improves on it in almost every way.

A small outpost in the frozen north, *Frosthaven* is under constant assault, if not from the merciless weather, then by the enemy forces. So, of course, there are plenty of things to do for a mercenary group. Around a hundred hours' worth, at least.

The general setup of the game's structure is similar to *Gloomhaven*. The party ventures outside of the outpost walls to complete various



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Map board
- ▶ 2 Scenario books
- ▶ Puzzle book
- ▶ 7 Sticker sheets
- ▶ Element board
- ▶ 5 Scenario flowcharts
- ▶ Advent calendar alchemy chart
- ▶ 4 Hit point & experience dials
- ▶ 17 Character miniatures and tuck boxes
- ▶ 30+ Map tiles
- ▶ 24 Plastic stands
- ▶ 6 Monster stat sleeves
- ▶ 6 Attack modifier decks
- ▶ 36 Personal quests
- ▶ 160 Event cards
- ▶ 40 Battle goals
- ▶ 30 Dungeon cards
- ▶ 48 Loot cards
- ▶ 15+ Random scenarios
- ▶ 250+ Tokens (conditions, loot, damage)
- ▶ 50+ Monster groups, stat cards, and ability Decks
- ▶ 100+ Overlay tiles
- ▶ 200+ Item cards
- ▶ 16 Mystery envelopes
- ▶ Other items not listed for spoiler reasons
- ▶ Kickstarter unit reviewed. Price to be confirmed, but we're expecting around the £180 mark when the retail version is announced.

missions, returning to *Frosthaven*, the base of operations, to level up, gain equipment and resolve events. However, an important new step has been introduced into this arrangement: the outpost phase, which includes the construction of buildings. These offer players more things to do while in *Frosthaven*, from crafting potions to trading resources, and many other exciting things that shall remain unspoiled.

Buildings also let players make *Frosthaven* their own as actual building stickers are added to the map, beautifully illustrated

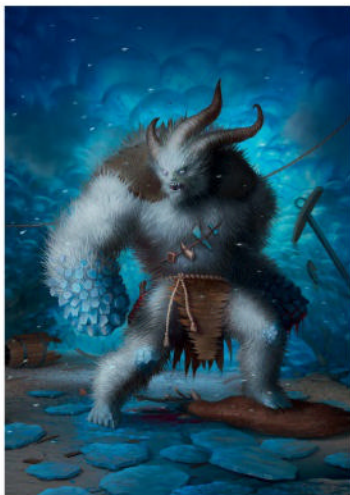
by Francesca Baerald. Based on various decisions throughout the game, everyone's *Frosthaven* will end up looking different.

Whereas in *Gloomhaven* the map felt a little like an afterthought, in *Frosthaven* it is the centerpiece of the game. Although most of the game's action still takes place in dungeon-like environments constructed out of modular tiles, the map brings the whole campaign together, tracking your journey and



showcasing the evolution of *Frosthaven* through time. In fact, *Frosthaven* tracks and ties all the events of the game a lot better than its predecessor. For example, the campaign sheet tracks the passage of time by weeks and any events can be marked on its timeline. In *Gloomhaven*, when a new card was added to the event's deck, it could show up on the following play session or in three months (by which time you likely have forgotten everything about it). In *Frosthaven*, you note the event on the timeline and read it when you reach that point. This not only makes you more excited for future sessions as you can see what is coming up, but also creates a sense of passage of time with a clearer and more immediate understanding of how your actions affect the world.

Even better, however, are the campaign flow charts. These are advent calendar-like boards that hide stickers that represent next missions on the map. However, even after each location is revealed, the boards serve as a reminder of the journey so far. It shows how each quest is

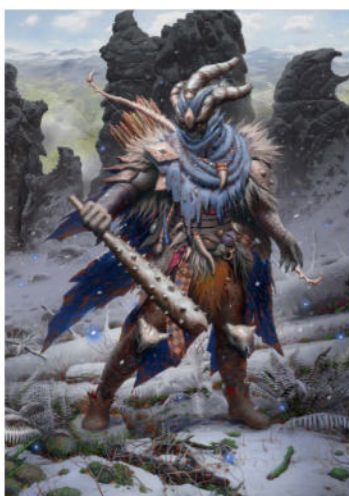


connected, which part of the storyline the quest belongs to and if there are any prerequisites to unlocking a new mission. There are so many things to do in *Frosthaven* that these boards become essential to easily keep track of the story, especially if your gaming group is returning to the game after a hiatus and needs a little reminder of where things stand.

The one aspect of the game that remained unchanged is the combat.

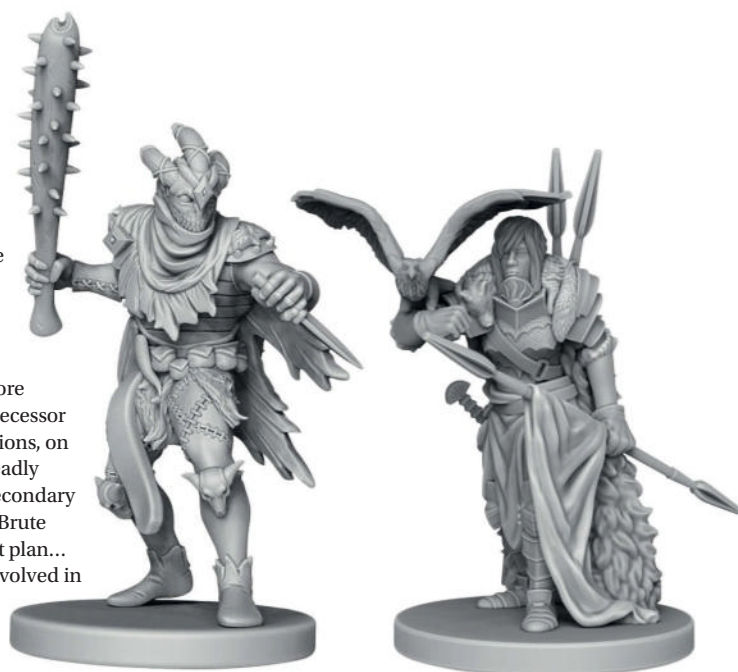
Here, players still select two cards to play each turn and choose a top and a bottom action to perform. Each battle is still incredibly strategic and rewards those players who plan, coordinate and time their moves carefully. *Frosthaven* demands even more tactical thinking than its predecessor did, because many of its missions, on top of throwing a bunch of deadly monsters at players, have a secondary objective or a puzzle. Simply Brute forcing it, isn't always the best plan...

The characters have also evolved in complexity. Their abilities tend to be more nuanced than simple 'attack' or



'move'. Status effects or elements charging up powerful attacks typically supplement the basic actions. Each character also has special overarching power that makes their gameplay unique but also ties back to their origin or story. One of the biggest enjoyments of the game is unlocking a new character and finally opening boxes containing their miniature and ability cards. Unlike its predecessor, in *Frosthaven*, most characters are unlocked through completing certain missions or events rather than fulfilling personal quests. This allows some character classes to be unlocked at the early stages of the campaign, which gives players more choices almost from the onset.

All this delicious variety and exciting mysterious legacy-style goodness comes with a large



box-shaped 'but.' With more variety comes more stuff, and with more stuff comes a need for more storage, and this can quickly get out of hand if players don't keep themselves organised. The base box comes with some inserts, but while they improve certain aspects of storage, not all are entirely successful, so alternatives may need to be purchased. A whole host of apps, some official and others fan made, could be used to simplify the more clunkier aspects of the gameplay, for example enemy decks.

Yet even still *Frosthaven* is a whole day affair, in large part due to its set up. Its components will easily hog your table, and the side table, and that extra chair you never used before, and any flat surface in arms reach of the table too. Rule learning will also take some time, even for those who played *Gloomhaven* before, as there are a bunch of new mechanics and some rule alterations (but these, thankfully, are nicely signposted). For newcomers this onslaught of rule information could be outright overwhelming, so they might need to persevere through a sluggish start of the campaign, until the rules will become second nature. And, please persevere, because it will be absolutely worth it! 🍷

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

Isaac Childres and team did it again! *Frosthaven* manages to retain everything that was excellent about *Gloomhaven* and add loads more. As for the unwieldy box, trust me, you will want to find a space for it on your shelf!

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED GLOOMHAVEN: JAWS OF LION...

Jaws of Lion is a perfect starting point for a newcomer to the universe: it has a much easier set up and great tutorials to learn the basics. Then, when you are absolutely hooked, *Frosthaven* awaits you.





EVERGREEN

Unlock the God complex within you.

Designer: Hjalmar Hach | **Publisher:** Horrible Guild

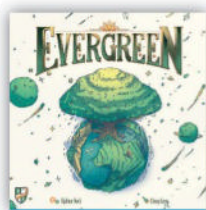


As board gaming's silver age trucks along, games begin to be reminiscent of a malthusian street. We're so deep in mechanisms piled on mechanisms at this point that all of our trouser cuffs are starting to get soggy so it's an unalloyed joy to find a designer that values clarity over clutter and depth over complication.

Hjalmar Hach is one of these designers and both of his 2022 designs are masterclasses in the art of simplicity. The other – *The Great Split*, co-designed with Lorenzo Silva – is a beautifully executed demonstration of the delicious torture of 'I-split-you-choose' as a mechanic. In *Evergreen* he has applied drafting to a game of reforestation that is as challenging as it is charming.

If you ever wanted to be a deity that is obsessed with trees then this is the game for you. In *Evergreen* players take charge of their own personal planet and sow sprouts that, hopefully, will grow into trees while making sure that as many of these will have access to light.

This is done by drafting cards. Each card is made up of two aspects, one is the terrain that you have to plant your sprouts or trees in and second is a special power that you



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 45 Sprouts
- ▶ 54 Small trees
- ▶ 61 Big Trees
- ▶ 20 Bush pawns
- ▶ 20 Lake pawns
- ▶ 4 Sun markers
- ▶ 36 cylinder markers
- ▶ First player token
- ▶ 4 Planet boards
- ▶ 42 Biome cards (6 for each Biome)



can use that turn. Players choose a card then can perform one from a set of standard actions that help them plant the sprouts that will become trees or husband their already planted vegetation into bigger trees. Special powers increase in strength each time they are chosen and include things like lakes that increase growing speed and hedges that can be used to join up separated forests and you want to do this because your largest contiguous forest will yield you points.

After a certain number of rounds, dictated by the season, there is a round of scoring. Every tree hit by the sun, a token at one of the cardinal points of your board, scores. Trees that are cast into shade by the trees in front of them, the length of their shadow is dictated by the size of the tree, don't score then you get one point for every tree in your largest forest. Then the sun moves 45 degrees and play continues.

The movement of the sun and the shadows it casts are at the heart of this game. This is where much of the challenge comes from. The trickiness

isn't only in harnessing the sun this round but placing your trees in such a way that they suck up its rays every season. It takes a mind that can model three dimensions and for someone who's spatial awareness is as impaired as mine it is particularly hard. Get it right though and your reward centres will be firing off like billy-oh.

This is a game of meticulous construction. It marshals mechanisms that are so simple but that result in a depth that belies the ease with which you can pick it up. This is a game I am uniformly terrible at but it is such a joy to play that I can't help but come back and be smacked around again and again.

It also looks lovely. It spills out charm from every piece of art and



every wooden competent. When Horrible Guild started it seems they were hellbent on cramming as much plastic in a box as they could, over the last years though that have consistently produced games that have components that are as classy as the designs themselves.

There is no avoiding the fact that this is a light game though and those enamoured of heavier fare probably won't be as engrossed by this as I was.

Evergreen offers a game that plays in an hour but has a depth of experience that is incredibly gratifying. Also you get to be God, which is nice. ●

BEN MADDOX

PLAY IT? YES

Maybe too light for some but it is so charming and crunchy that most will love it.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SANTORINI...

There is spatial challenge here and the angst of hoping the so and so across from you doesn't snaffle the card you need. It's great fun.



DARK VENTURE: BATTLE OF THE ANCIENTS

Unearthly beings battle to the death in bizarre environments.

Designer: Rob Lemon | **Publisher:** Gilded Skull Games



Battle of the Ancients is both the second standalone release in the *Dark Venture* line, and also the second title from designer/publisher Rob Lemon. Just like its predecessor, it has a dark vibe blending science fiction and fantasy to form the backdrop of a stylized alien world. It's an enthralling setting, carried between both games, and it's full of sensation and wonder. That's about as far as the commonalities go between both *Dark Venture* releases.

The previous title was an adventure game, reminiscent of titles like *Runebound*, *Xia: Legends of the Drift*, and *Western Legends*. You controlled a single character, wandered around a map, and made story decisions with branching choose-your-own-adventure elements. *Battle of the Ancients* is a skirmish game. It's more like *Mythic Battles: Pantheon* or *Warhammer 40k: Kill Team*. It's still a board game that eschews miniatures for cardboard counters, but it's an evocative battle between small armies as you dig through the muck, traverse rivers, and split skulls.

Asymmetry is a key feature here. There are five distinct factions with more available in the two separate boxed expansions. From the Varpen whose units grow in size and strength, to the Dhargon that collect resources on the map to construct their soldiers, there is a wide array of strategies and features that provide a tactical puzzle to solve. These are even options for

players to take on the role of a single hero vacant of a supporting cast - this evokes a similar feel to a more combative Vagabond in the popular area control game *Root*. Just like the ruleset surrounding the different species of warriors, the details are rich and narratively inspiring.

Battle of the Ancients is defined by its creativity. It feels more a sandbox than a straight brawler. You can play in straight up battles where you compete to fulfill faction specific as well as public objectives for points. You can engage in scenario play with more oblique and interesting goals. Or you can play entirely narrative driven miniature campaigns where you and your friends battle an A.I. controlled faction and utilise a little book that spins off decision-based story snippets. It's wild how malleable and successful this game is in capturing these distinct formats. None feel an afterthought or tacked on, all feel organic and sharp.

The automated opponents are controlled by a series of cards which walk you through a procedural phase of spawning and activating units, moving, and seeking targets to battle. It's not the most robust system but it's also not thin or too susceptible to player-induced trickery. I do think *Dark Venture: Battle of the Ancients* runs best as a competitive endeavour, but the adventure mode with narrative exploration is somewhat mesmerising and rather unique.

All of these various play options are

woven together under the common trait of an expressive and vibrant world. The map certainly comes alive through the wild artwork, but it's also full of neat little quirks. You can vault off bridges into streams. You can tear up the earth to extract minerals. You can storm inside of buildings and move your units to a sideboard as they seize the upper floors. You can also erect fences and walls to stymie the opposition.

This inventiveness runs off a simple activation system where a dice pool offers your action options for the turn. It's a very stripped down mechanism that offers a degree of choice narrowed by random input. Combat is also resolved through dice rolling and is the most loose part of play, sure to aggravate those who place tactical control as their top priority.

It never loses itself under the weight of its systems or oppressive uncertainty. In some sense, these dice-based mechanisms sit as merely the scaffolding behind the curtain to the wonderful asymmetric abilities and clever unexpected twists. This is a fantastic indie release and stands larger than the previous *Dark Venture* title. 🍷

CHARLIE THEEL

PLAY IT? YES

Wonderful conflict, creative solutions, and such a wide range of devious content. This is rich with narrative to create and explore, and the experience only sharpens with repeated visits to the table top.

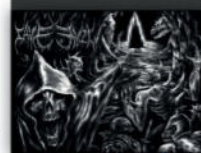


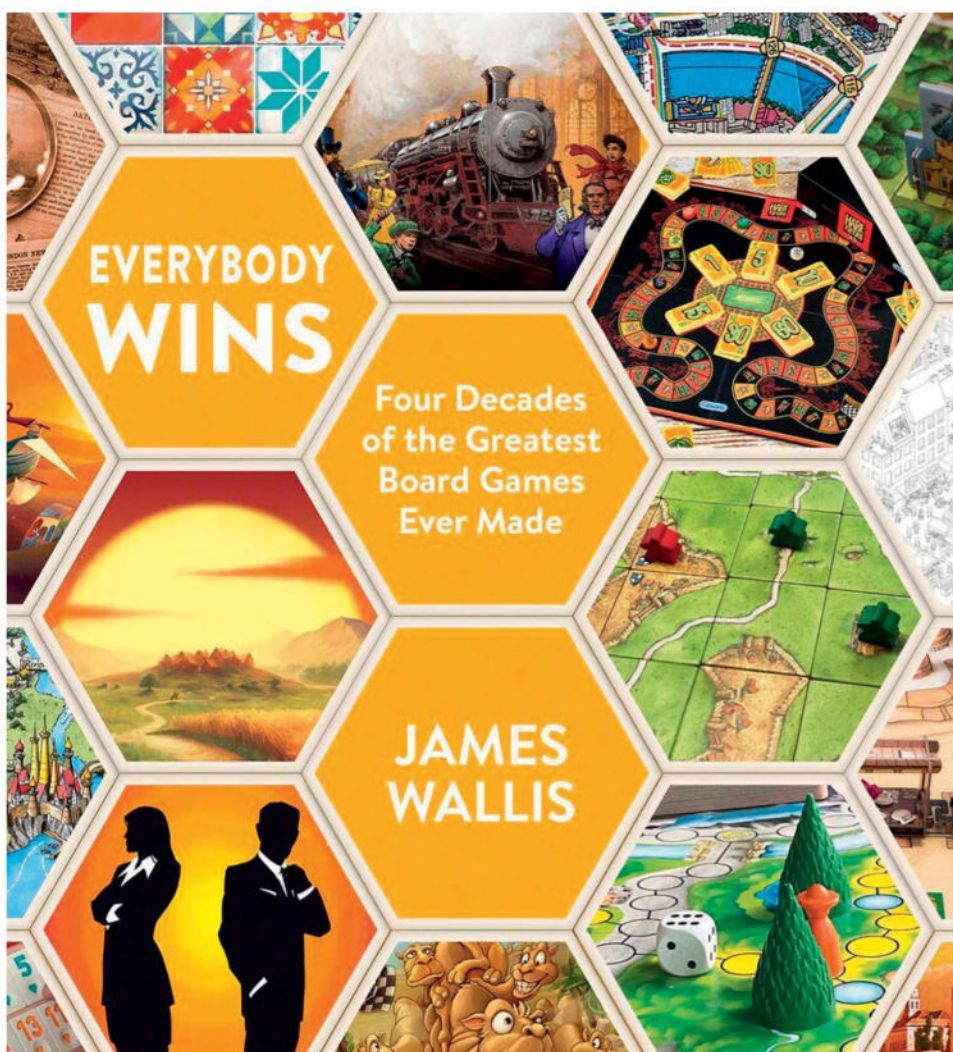
WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Booklets (Rules, Scenario, Faction Guide, Adventure)
- ▶ Double-sided game board
- ▶ 5 Faction dashboards
- ▶ Victory point track
- ▶ 4 Oversized reference cards
- ▶ 184 Cards
- ▶ 3 Large building floor tokens
- ▶ 358 Tokens
- ▶ 10 Fence miniatures
- ▶ 10 Wall miniatures
- ▶ 1 Cloth bag
- ▶ 22 Dice
- ▶ 32 Wood cubes

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CAVE EVIL...

Gathering resources and marshalling a demonic army in service of carnage binds both games together. They also each retain a fiery indie spirit that's singular.





EVERYBODY WINS

The best of the best

Designer: James Wallis | Publisher: Aconyte Books



Board game awards are a strange thing. With translations and second editions popping up all over the place, it's sometimes tricky to nail down exactly when a game should actually win any given award for the year. The Spiel des Jahres, which has been running since 1978 has this problem too – from outside Germany at least – last year's shortlist included a couple of Osprey titles that had been popular here in the UK for a couple of years.

But, as *Everybody Wins* tells us, the

role of the Spiel des Jahres is huge, casting light on important games from the hobby – and often adding half a million sales in exchange for the red pawn that denotes being a winner.

This handsome (and heavy) book takes us on a journey through the winners (with a glance at the losers) of the most important prize in gaming



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TABLETOP GAMING MAGAZINE...

Yes, the thing you're reading right now. If a big selection of games to flick through is why you're reading this, then *Everybody Wins* is the ideal coffee table companion.

from 1978 (David Parlett's *Hare and Tortoise*) through to last year's *Cascadia*. On the way there James Wallis puts it all into the context of the 'movements' within the awards – classifying a 'golden age' or an 'identity crisis' for example. It's a smart way to look at what is a series of beacons flashing a path homewards throughout the years.

The majority of these game write-ups appeared first in the pages of *Tabletop Gaming* magazine (42 entries in the end) as our All The Jahres feature. But Wallis has elevated the pieces beyond the initial features in the magazine, adding further depth across the four decades that the book covers. In addition to the main narrative about each games (and whether they really deserved it) there are a number of excellent box-outs with micro-essays on the history around the game or some other cultural pitstop. These little boxouts make for entertaining diversions into the world of licensed games, colonialism, and the history of the meeple.

The book is a charming trip throughout the winners certainly – but for those interested in the missteps, there's real gold here too. The epilogue to the book includes a 'The Ones That Didn't Win' section that runs through all of those titles that are undeniably influential to the hobby (*Pokemon TCG*, *Trivial Pursuit*, *Jenga*, *Warhammer* and so on). It's an honest appraisal of the world that the awards operate in.

And the writing? I've written before to say that one of the best part of the job is getting to read Wallis' jokes before everyone else does. This book is no exception.

A perfect place to start a journey into the hobby – or as a guide to head back and find the classics.

Does everybody win then?

Yes, they do, actually. 🍎

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

An enlightening trip through the world of games as they were, and what they may well end up being.

PUZZLE STRIKE II

A tacky, plastic, flashing scepter? Count me in

Designer: David Sirlin | Publisher: Sirlin Games



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ The Scepter
- ▶ 123 gems
- ▶ Bank Board
- ▶ 8 Player Boards
- ▶ 40 Tokens
- ▶ 198 Cards

Try to think of the best first-player tokens you've encountered over the years. Now forget them all and clasp your hands around *Puzzle Strike II*'s 'Scepter of Power'. This incredible piece of tabletop engineering features not one, but two pulsing crystals set within its silver speckled purple plastic staff, activated by the press of a button and the eldritch power of three LR44 alkaline batteries. I shouldn't need to say much more really, but I will, as the game responsible for this unashamedly gaudy curio is actually rather good.

The original *Puzzle Strike* appeared in 2010. Its novel (at the time) 'chip' / bag-building shook up the growing deck-building genre and kicked off Sirlin Games' *Fantasy Strike* family of games, whilst the tetris-esque tension of stacking and 'crashing' gems captured an audience that endures to this day. But, novel as it was, Sirlin Games have now done away with tactile chips in favour of something approaching more traditional deck-building.

I use the word traditional loosely though, as *Puzzle Strike II* is a curious specimen.

Like its predecessor, the theming here involves a tournament of battling beasts, humans, and talking pandas. It's not really important. Similarly, *Puzzle Strike II* also takes the original's concept of cautiously stacking gems before blasting them towards opponents, but enlivens it with a

colourful twist. Essentially, players will be facing an onslaught of different coloured gems dropping into their 'gem pile', which can only be depleted by 'crashing' consecutive strings of matching colours. A somewhat reductive comparison would perhaps be the popular *Bejeweled* mobile games, or, for those who remember, SEGA's *Columns*. Through card-play, gems can be switched around, destroyed, and generally manipulated before a 'crash' sends them straight over for your opponent to deal with next turn. If there is ever more than ten gems in the gem pile at the end of a players turn they are eliminated.

Amidst this, players will be purchasing cards for their decks and powering up their Super Moves; game-changing abilities associated with each of the four gem colours, activated when their respective rows are filled. Despite being game-changing, these abilities will be triggering frequently, enhancing the overall kinetic volatility of the game.

Making everything feel slightly less abstract and considerably more tactile are the chunky gems themselves. These lovingly overproduced components are constantly coming in and out of their dedicated trays and shifting around on player boards. Lining up a huge shimmering string of spiky purple crystals before 'crashing' them all away *feels* good, and having them hop across to the corresponding

Super Move row, filling it up and firing it off before refilling the remainder is genuinely exciting.

With ten quirky characters to choose from, each with their own trio of unique starting cards, and two included main decks, *Puzzle Strike II* has a generous amount of replayability. Whilst players can build any kind of deck they want during the game, the characters nonetheless impart a touch of identity upon play styles, and building towards them is fun to experiment with. Of the two main decks, Birthday Bash shines the most, with its 'present' keyword triggering all kinds of mechanical silliness and offering the most theme.

Despite my opening words, the sceptre isn't the best part of the game. Mechanically, it enables the bearer to add one of each gem to the Super Move pool and attack all players simultaneously, albeit at the cost of less flexibility when defending themselves from incoming gems. It's powerful, but often the wise thing to do is shift it upon someone else. If I'm honest, I played with it more between games than during, and that says something about the strength of Sirlin Games' design. ●

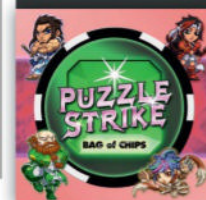
CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? YES

A potential must-play hampered by occasionally lengthy turns and a high price.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PUZZLE STRIKE...

A refreshing revision of an already fun formula.





TIME OF EMPIRES

Your empire best strike back

Designer: David Simiand & Pierre Voye | **Publisher:** Pearl Games



Let's cut to it, after all, the sand timers are running. *Time of Empires* is the best game I've played this year. It has literally everything you want from a big, hearty, empire-building board game, while killing off the unwanted aspects. There's drama, there's chaos, there's puzzles and strategy, there's the 20 minutes afterwards where everyone talks about their tactics, and what they're going to do next time they play. It's brilliant, and you should go buy yourself a copy right now.

It's a civilisation building game where you, as a player, need to generate resources to pay for powers, build building, raise an army, claim territory, influence leaders and even build wonders. Each time you play a power you need to pay for it with resources, which are generated from two worker placement slots on your board. Once the cost is paid you can play it, generating whatever benefit



it describes – more resources, units, scholars and so on. That card can now be built, with a separate action, which takes further resources. When you finally build that card, you take

one of the little wooden meeples of a building (a windmill, a barracks and so on) and place it somewhere you control on the main board. You've just uncovered something on your player board, and now, the next time you generate that resource (or units, or scholars) you create more of that thing. This fun bit of engine building must be balanced against the expansion of your empire on the main board via military might, and end of round points. Once you create soldiers (these are stackable plastic chips) you place them on the board somewhere you control, and another action can be taken to move them. Move them into territory with someone's piece, and you'll start a very simple war where – we assume – armies run at each other with the pointy end of a stick and the team with the most soldiers wins. You remove as many from your stack as there are enemies, and remove those

too, with a last man standing rule for control of the hex. If you roll into someone's province where they have a building, you burn it down, and put it in a pile on your personal board. Then there's the scholars, who can be used to build wonders (end of round points) where you only get the points if you have the majority, and leaders, which confer ongoing powers into the next rounds.

Now, all of this sounds pretty straightforwardly 4X. Very simplified and cut down maybe. A gateway

think about grain silo placement for 15 minutes on his turn, despite it being obvious that he'd place it exactly where he placed it. Instead, you're probably not going to have a chance to see what exactly Jeremy is up to, and instead go with your gut that he's probably a bit of a threat and take him down anyway. You might see another player take control of a leader that you'd previously invested in, and now you need to make the choice – switch your next move to winning that back, or somehow take petty revenge elsewhere.

score sheet, soundtrack, and a trigger for when you can build scholars (an end game scoring sort of unit). As I mentioned in the interview last month, this app is very distracting to parents of young children, as a baby's cry is the sign that a new scholar has been born. It's a genius bit of design as the injection of levity from what is quite an intense game of peering around the table to take optimal moves very quickly almost always get a bit of a laugh.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Common boards
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 4 Leader tiles
- ▶ 12 Terrain tiles
- ▶ 8 Sand timers
- ▶ 16 Sand timer caps (rubber)
- ▶ 80 Population tokens
- ▶ 80 Building tokens
- ▶ 48 Resource tokens
- ▶ 118 Cards



Eurogame that'll bring in loads of new players. To this I say, yes it is, but also, it's all played in real time. The workers you're placing are sand timers, and you've got two. You play them, and then, when they're run through, you can flip them on to another worker placement space to take any of the actions above.

And it is the perfect chaos of a huge empire building game.

The fun of a big civilisation or empire building game is those long turns where you think about whether you're about to invade your table neighbour's region, breaking a hundred-years long pact that had brought prosperity to the region – because it looks like Jeremy is going to gain even more victory points through grain this turn. Then *Time of Empires* explodes the bit where Jeremy got to

The whole game is a head-spinningly fast. At two players you're in a tight duel for the space and end game points where every movement away from the current tug of war is analysed with suspicion. Can you trust that they're really interested in that ongoing power from a leader or the end of round points? Or is it just a distraction so they can roll out another attack into your homelands.

The war that happens on the table between players – with a single-sided conflict resolution – means that you'll take your eye away from the board for a moment and find you've lost territories and building when you look back. It contains all of those elements of a big, chunky 4X game, but at hyper speed.

And with this comes the very simple app, which acts as a timer,

Everything about this game is designed to plug you into some fuzzy decision making. You'll regret a third of every turn you have in the game, but it won't matter, because everyone else is making their decisions shooting from the hip as well.

At the end of just over half an hour (assuming you have a little break between each round) you'll have a winner, have destroyed and rebuild empires, and most importantly created a new enemy to hold a grudge against for the next time round. And as with all of our favourite games like this, that next time will be right now. 📌

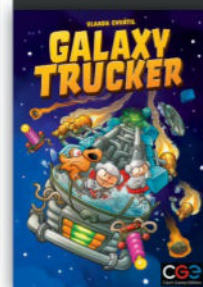
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

Pure, unadulterated fun in the span of half an hour. The 4X game for the masses.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED GALAXY TRUCKER...

Time of Empires is a great step up from *Galaxy Trucker* but with a deeper and more rewarding range of strategies to uncover.





BEER & BREAD

Fulfil your wildest hops and dreams

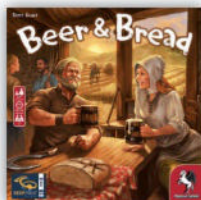
Designer: Scott Almes | Publisher: Pegasus Spiele



In *Beer and Bread*, you and another player control neighbouring villages with a friendly rivalry. Both sides have long competed to prove who has the best bakers and brewers. In an effort to settle the matter, you embark upon a gruelling six-year long contest to decide who is truly the champion of these traditional bucolic arts. The losing village will be razed to the ground, its inhabitants banished, its name erased from the history books.

That last sentence isn't true – unless you house-rule it – but it's certainly the case that a great deal of pride is at stake in this two-player game of hand management and resource control. The game is split into six rounds or 'years', three of which will have bumper harvests, and three of which will have smaller yields. In each of those years, you'll be dealt a hand of cards, each of which allow you to do multiple things, depending on which bit of the card you choose to activate.

You can play a card for its harvest section, in which case you grab some resources from the fields or the river – wheat, barley, rye, hops or water, each charmingly rendered in coloured wooden tokens – and place them in your storehouse. If you've already harvested that year, you get the resources on the card you play *plus*



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 60 x cards
- ▶ Board
- ▶ 84 resource tokens
- ▶ Year marker
- ▶ Scoring pad
- ▶ Windmill

all the ones you've already harvested, again. Which means that harvesting loads reaps ever-bigger rewards... except you've got limited storage space and the fields – which you share with your neighbour – don't have infinite supplies.

In fact, if you harvest resources you can't store, you have to offer them to your opponent. So maybe you need to produce some bread and/or beer? That is, after all, what this contest is about. The middle of each card shows a recipe for the aforementioned carbohydrate comestible or heady beverage – all you need do is place the card in your brewery or bakery along with the required resources and your team will get to work.

But wait! What if your brewers are already up to their armpits in intoxicating hoppy suds? Maybe you need to expand your facilities – or at least clean them so you can start work on a new recipe. The lowest section of each card features an upgrade you can slot into the bottom of your player board to give you on ongoing

bonus, special ability, or additional points at the game's end. At the same time, you remove completed beer and bread recipes from your brewery and bakery, freeing up space.

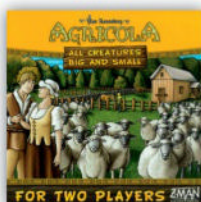
The final, delicious twist in the artisanal pretzel is that, in fruitful years, you don't get to keep your hand; rather, you play a card, then pass the rest to your opponent, who passes you theirs, then the process repeats. In dry years, you can swap cards in your hand with those in a small tableau. This makes each choice a fiendish trilemma – should you harvest these resources now, knowing your opponent might take the card that will let you turn those resources into beer, upgrade your facilities to make later moves more efficient, or maybe take the recipe you suspect they might be building towards? Cards harvested in fruitful years return to your hand, allowing a nice rhythm of resource gathering and planning when crops are bumper, then brewing and baking when things are lean.

Designer Scott Almes has been steadily establishing a reputation that manages to link the normally-distant qualities of reliable and ingenious, with fun, solid titles like *So, You've Been Eaten*, the *Tiny Epic* series, and criminally-overlooked skeleton-dynamiting escapade *The Great Dinosaur Rush*. *Beer and Bread* continues this tradition. It's fun, squeeze and thinky, fairly easy to pick up and relaxed without being shallow.

If I had to reach for gripes, the game feels like it's been balanced to within an inch of its life – the five resources more or less function identically, recipes all score within a tight band of points, upgrades offer mostly marginal benefits – so, for all your choices, it's actually very forgiving. But overall, this is a very enjoyable light-to-midweight title that will make you the 'toast' – a pun that works for both beer and bread – of any gaming night. 🍷

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? YES



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED AGRICOLA: ALL CREATURE BIG & SMALL...

Uwe Rosenberg fans – of which I am one – will find much to enjoy in *Beer and Bread*, especially if they like his work on the *Agricola: All Creatures Big & Small* and *Hallertau* end of things.

ECO: CORAL REEF

Prepare for choppy waters

Designer: Izik Nevo | Publisher: UBG



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 40 Picture tiles
- ▶ Score board
- ▶ 20 Mission tiles
- ▶ First player token
- ▶ 8 Gems
- ▶ 4 Turtle meeples

Having an 'important message' at the heart of a tabletop game is a great way to capture the attention and raise awareness about the issue. And we can probably all agree, the conservation of the coral reefs is up there with the most 'important messages'. Unfortunately, although admirable, these attempts to raise awareness for particular issues don't always create the foundations for a great game.



In *ECO: Coral Reef* you're thrust into the role of a marine biologist attempting to conserve marine life on a coral reef. Thankfully though, you're not going to have to get your scuba diving gear on. Instead you use tiles featuring pictures of various marine life to create patterns on a shared game area. Complete a pattern and you score points, which moves your extremely cute turtle meeple further along the score track. Once you reach a set point limit – determined by the number of players – it's game over and one player is deemed to be turtlely awesome (sorry, we had to cram that pun in somewhere).

In order to wiggle that turtle up the track you need to complete mission tiles. The tiles show different layouts you're required to create by placing certain marine life in particular patterns in the game area, e.g. groups of three sea creatures in a diagonal line, or two sea creatures in a cross shape. There are five different sea creature tiles in total featuring one, two, three, four and five marine life.

Once it's your turn you've got the option of: placing one of your creature tiles next to a tile that's already been placed in the playing area, picking up new creature tiles or getting new mission tiles. That's pretty much it for the core rules, which are admirably easy to understand and certainly help to introduce *ECO* to younger players who may enjoy the theme.

Things become a bit less admirable when it comes to scoring though. You

with five completely different tiles or forget the pattern and just make a rectangular square. Any of these three methods net you a cool seven points.

The clunky scoring is compounded further by the fact you can also line up matching coral types – shown on the corners of each sea creature tile – to score points too. There are six coral types and matching a pair scores you one point each, while completing a circle of four scores four points.



see, although it may initially seem like you're attempting to complete the mission tiles by lining up the sea creatures in the pattern shown on the tile; that's not the whole story. In fact, you can ignore the animals shown on the tile entirely and create the pattern

Although having all these scoring methods means you sometimes pass a mission without realising, or just ignore them entirely to focus on coral matching. Alternatively, you can be presented with too many options to score and spend ages working out the best way to maximise your points in a turn.

Finally it's worth noting that there's some lovely artwork on *ECO* that isn't given enough room to breathe. On each tile you've got four bits of brightly coloured coral and up to five creatures, all crammed onto 4cm x 4cm tile. The result is a bit busy, particularly when clustered together on the game map, which can also make scoring trickier as you try to work out exactly what is on each tile. With larger tiles – or perhaps even cards – a game of *ECO* would have created a gorgeous coral reef bustling with life, instead you end up with a multi-coloured jumble. 🐢

ROB BURMAN

PLAY IT? MAYBE

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CARCASSONNE

If you're looking for a smaller, easier to transport tile-placement game... with turtles, then *ECO* certainly ticks that box.



CASTLE PANIC: BIG BOX

Saving the Kingdom from infinite disasters

Designer: Justin De Witt | Publisher: Fireside Games



There's something very satisfying about protecting a castle from monsters. *Castle Panic* traps players inside an irresponsibly vulnerable citadel whilst a variety of horrible creatures approach. To survive, they must work, co-operatively, to defeat the onslaught. First released in 2009, the designer likely took inspiration from the digital 'Tower Defence' genre that exploded around that time. Fans of those addictive mobile games, with their unending waves of unstoppable horrors, will probably enjoy *Castle Panic*.

I've been a fan of this game for years. It's well balanced – our first game this week came down to one monster, one remaining tower, and one card – with easy-to-learn mechanics. It's also significantly less stressful than standout co-op rival *Pandemic*, and a points based score for each player can reduce the 'quarterback' effect that some co-operative games suffer from, where an experienced player orders everyone else around. This second edition features new artwork and a brand new expansion. We've taken a look here at the Big Box version, one cavernous case containing the base game and all 4 expansions; *The Dark Titan*, *The Wizard's Tower*, *Engines of War* and the new *Crowns and Quests*.

A full explanation of everything in this mighty chest is beyond the scope of this review, but in brief, the expansions take the simpler puzzle of the base game, and expand upon it in a variety of interesting ways.

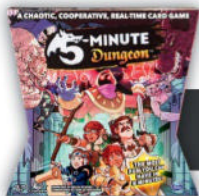
The most obvious addition is more types, strengths and flavours of monsters. Extras like flame breathing mechanics and flying beasts increase the challenge facing your plucky rampart dwellers. Every expansion adds these, alongside new ways to counteract them.

The Dark Titan adds Agranok, a powerful new super-enemy, with support tokens and a mounted Cavalier to aid players. *The Wizard's Tower* brings an extra tower to the game, and a powerful Wizard's deck.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Board
- ▶ Tar token
- ▶ Custom die
- ▶ 64 Castle cards
- ▶ 114 Monster cards
- ▶ 6 Walls
- ▶ 6 Towers
- ▶ 15 Plastic stands.
- ▶ 21 Reference cards
- ▶ Wizard tower
- ▶ 22 Wizard cards
- ▶ 6 Harbinger tokens
- ▶ 6 Mega boss monster tokens
- ▶ 12 Flame tokens
- ▶ Monster draw bag
- ▶ Agranok token
- ▶ 5 Agranok cards
- ▶ Cavalier token
- ▶ 16 Support tokens
- ▶ 16 Resource cards
- ▶ 7 Promo cards
- ▶ 5 Promo towers



The added decision space here is well thought-out; powerful as many of the more swifty Wizard cards are, they rely on the normal Castle cards for synergy, leading to interesting choices about which type to pick up or discard.

Complexity comes along with *Engines of War*'s light economic dressing, which adds resources and the ability to build Catapults and Equipment with an Engineer. It certainly widens the options for strategy and planning, although I'm not sure the added complication and play-time actually provides any more fun than the vanilla version. However, for those who find the base game too simple, this adds a crunchier depth.

Finally, the newest addition, *Crowns and Quests*, brings a campaign aspect to the game, with differently skilled characters and multiple objective-filled quests to complete on the route to victory. Of the four, this expansion adds the greatest variety and replayability, all without messing with the core experience of the game too much. I'd suggest this and *Wizard's Tower* as the stand outs, although all of them add something interesting and unique. The designers recommend only really using one at a time;

throwing in all four would be complex, chaotic, and... I kinda want to try it.

Now, I don't think Fireside Games have done a particularly good job at a box insert. Whilst tokens and cards have a little symbol on them to differentiate between each expansion, setup is still too lengthy for my taste, and I'm confident a better moulded insert with clearly labelled sections for each expansion could have hugely reduced this. Due to this, the light-weight *Castle Panic* takes nearly half its play time again to set up. A few plastic bags eased things, but

I'd hoped not to have to take on the organisation myself.

Alongside this, the rule book doesn't take quite enough time to hold your hand through the increased pieces and complexity of the Big Box experience. Searching through the multiple expansions' rules during play would have been much easier with an index too – although I'm sure this is not the last time I'll be ranting about that problem.

Those gripes aside; like *Carcassonne*'s Big Box there's enough additional gameplay here to keep a group going for years, and compared to purchasing it all separately, it's a decent price. If you enjoyed the first edition, or if you fancy a new experience that's great for dedicated gaming groups and families alike, you should definitely p

ut up some cardboard walls, wind up your catapult, and give *Castle Panic* a try. 🎲

CHRIS LOWRY

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

An adventure for your gang that's fun every time, with enough options to steadily take you from gateway gauziness to gamer's game.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED 5 MINUTE DUNGEON...

Castle Panic takes the theme, the co-operative challenge and fairly short play time, but ditches the chaos and brain trauma of *5 Minute Dungeon*'s real time element.

THE GUARDIANS OF HAVERSACK

Family friendly sack building

Designer: Frederic Guerard | Publisher: Catch Up Games



When an evil sorceress threatens the land you can't just pull heroes from a bag...can you? *The Guardians of Haversack* insists you can. Multiple times in fact, as is befitting of a bag-building game.

The Guardians of Haversack's tidy game length (thirty minutes is about right) stretches across five rounds of simultaneous play, whereby players

gain the glory needed to trade in for gold and points.

Whilst creating a cohesive band of specialised guardians makes up a fair bulk of the strategy here, there's more to be found in the game's rules concerning navigation of the map. At the start of the game, guardians begin their movement from the central castle space. From here, subsequent guardians can either start at the castle

can enter spaces with monsters, and lakes can only be crossed with the terrain-negating abilities of the ranger.

It's worth noting that whilst the order in which guardians are drawn clearly influences how effectively plans and obstacles can be adhered to and combated, players are always safe in the knowledge that *all* of their tokens will make an appearance during a turn. This is a nice change from the typical 'luck-of-the-draw' mechanics of other bag-builders, and ensures that each investment in additional guardians feels worthwhile.

What this amounts to is a nicely thematic little puzzle, albeit one which never becomes too taxing, even for younger players. Indeed, turns zip along quite well thanks to the accessible rules and simultaneous play, but, on the other hand, it is this latter component that emphasises the solitary nature of *Guardians*. With its strong adventurous theme, bright, cartoonish aesthetic, and a design geared towards families, it was surprising to find *Guardians* lacking the level of interaction typically associated with family games. Simultaneous play may well negate downtime between turns, but the result is five rounds of people figuring out the same puzzle on identical maps. Perhaps it was a tad hasty to assume otherwise, but the presence of zero interaction aside from comparing final scores feels nonetheless slightly jarring.

For those not put off by notions of multiplayer-solitaire, *Guardians* should offer plenty of enjoyment for players both new and seasoned. There's a simple satisfaction to pulling tokens from a bag, and when this results in a perfect turn of cascading luck and skill, it's hard not to be impressed. 🍷

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? YES

A polished and well-paced bag-builder, perfect for a competitive yet non-confrontational family games night.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Adventure Boards
- ▶ Score Board
- ▶ 6 Guardian Tiles
- ▶ 4 Expedition Bags
- ▶ 88 Guardian Tokens
- ▶ 112 Creature Tokens
- ▶ 28 Scout Cards
- ▶ 40 Chest Tokens
- ▶ 40 Village Tokens
- ▶ 12 Tent Tokens
- ▶ 28 Gold Pieces
- ▶ 4 Score Markers



will be populating their lands with monsters, pulling guardians from their bags, gaining coins and points, and enlisting new guardians. The game's six types of guardians are represented by tokens, with each activating their own movement values and unique abilities when drawn from the bag. The warrior, for example, can move two spaces orthogonally before defeating any enemy residing in that space, whilst the thief can move three spaces and unlock treasure chests. By travelling across the map defeating monsters, capturing fairies, rebuilding villages, and uncovering treasure, players will

or spawn from the same space as another guardian. Furthermore, at the end of each round, any 'guide' guardians will erect a tent where they stand creating more spawning opportunities in the next round.

Due to the relatively large maps and the unpredictable spawning of monsters, careful consideration of these rules is important, as reaching the peripheral spaces is dependent on how well players can string together a network of guardians or tents.

Furthermore, these maps are rife with obstacles: forests end movement immediately yet open up the other side to future guardians, only warriors

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TINY TOWNS...

Both games share a fun, yet solitary, almost 'roll & write' like format – albeit one bursting from the two-dimensional static page and into to the third.



STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS

Time to take the high ground

Designer: Alexandar Ortloff & Matt Leacock | Publisher: Z-Man Games



Since its launch in 2008, Matt Leacock's *Pandemic* has gone from being a ground-breaking co-op game to a genre in a box. Beyond its own expansions and remixes, it's been re-themed for Lovecraft, flood-fighting, the fall of the Roman Empire, World of Warcraft and 19th-century Iberia. In a sense, it's surprising it's taken so long for the "Pandemic System" (as it's now branded) to reach a certain Galaxy Far, Far Away.

Anyone familiar with the clunky theme-slapping of, say, *Star Wars Monopoly* can be forgiven an eyeroll at this point. But don't dismiss this latest *Pandemic* out of hand. Smartly drawing from the fan-favoured *Clone Wars* series rather than the patchy cinematic saga, this is a *Star Wars* reskin that goes more than reskin deep.

Pandemic's core mechanism of dramatic, deck-based escalation translates well from disease outbreaks to battle-droid invasions. While the board's planetary system doesn't quite catch the eye like a good old-fashioned world map, you enjoy the same sense of things getting out of hand as all those wee droid miniatures start crowding up the planets, and your Jedi heroes (each with their own handy free-action power) have to carefully coordinate to deal with them.

But that's not the only thing Obi-Wan, Anakin, Ahsoka and co. have to contend with. For a start, they have a number of missions to complete



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Twelve-sided die
- ▶ 46 Squad cards
- ▶ 32 Invasion cards
- ▶ 7 Jedi cards
- ▶ 4 Villain sheets
- ▶ 24 Villain cards
- ▶ 24 Mission cards
- ▶ 7 Jedi miniatures
- ▶ 4 Villain miniatures
- ▶ 3 Blockade miniatures
- ▶ 36 Battle droid miniatures
- ▶ 2 Track markers
- ▶ 2 Mission markers
- ▶ Reminder marker
- ▶ Slider
- ▶ 5 Reference cards
- ▶ Solo marker



(how many depends on the difficulty level you choose). Then there's a boss villain to fight, too. You can choose to one of four: sleek assassin Asajj Ventress; tubercular cyborg General Grievous; weirdly not-dead Darth Maul; or the formidable Count Dooku. Each has their own deck of troublesome villain cards (although there's always one which will spark a horrible invasion), and their own finale, which is triggered as soon as all the missions are completed. Each one gives the game a distinctly different feel, in terms of the details of what's happening, if not the overall mood.

At the lower difficulty levels, it will all be quite manageable for the experienced *Pandemic* player. Especially as chain-reaction-starting outbreaks don't occur in this version of the game; instead of adding more droids to neighbouring worlds when a planet is full, you place a blockade. This must be removed via combat (handled by the roll of a chunky 12-sided die) before anything else – such as completing a mission – can be achieved on that world. The catch

is, there are only three blockades, and the threat marker must advance along its potentially game-ending track if you ever can't place one.

You also get a lot of help courtesy of your squad cards, which contain military support from clone troopers, armoured vehicles, journey-shortening starships and powerful allies. Most cards can potentially be retained for the duration of the game, forming a handy tableau whose powers can be repeatedly applied. However, if you take damage (and you *will* take damage), and can't block it by exhausting armour cards, you'll have to sacrifice some of this support.

This squad dynamic is particularly thematically pleasing, giving you the sense of each Jedi as a military leader who must sometimes make tough decisions to prevail against ever-increasing odds. 📌

DAN JOLIN

PLAY IT? YES

A neatly implemented blend of a slick, entertaining game system with a beloved theme. The miniatures are decent, too.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING...

Designer Alexandar Ortloff's last *Pandemic* System game feels closest to *Clone Wars*, though there are shades of *Reign of Cthulhu* in there, too.



SLUGBLASTER

Warp travel on a hoverboard in the 90s you wish had existed

Designer: Mikey Hamm | Publisher: Wilkie's Candy Lab



Depressingly, I'm old enough to remember the 90s. Not brilliantly well, but my early teens were a world of dial-up internet, calling friends from phone boxes and hanging around in parks. If that aimless existence had included DIY laser grenades and hacked-together hover boards, I'd have been absolutely involved. *Slugblaster* is a roleplay game set in that psychedelic future-past that never happened.

The firm thing that grabs your attention is the unusual shape and wacky colouring of this beautiful game. Square books lay flat on a table much better than A5, and this 9" by 9" colourfeast flops into the hand perfectly too. The layout, artwork and typography is spot on, hitting hip, wacky and fun without ever landing on cheesy or try-hard; the pieces by Scott A Ford are some of the best illustrations I've seen this decade. Every page jumps out at you and works at gravitating you in. I guarantee that if you put this in the hands of literally anyone, they'll comment on its enticing appearance.

Packaging matters; the visual experience half-teaches you the setting before you read a word. A full page illustration of a teen sneaking in through a window, tentacles climbing the tree behind them, with arm-crossed parents waiting inside? You already know you are going to be dimension-diving one minute and then grounded the next. *Slugblaster* is very deliberately set in the awkward teenage middle-years – as Mikey Hamm words it, "that time in between, when anything feels possible, everything feels important and nothing feels quite right". It does

it well too, hitting a brighter note than *Tales From The Loop*, whilst providing a weirder, more full-featured universe to explore than *Kids On Bikes*.

I loved *Tales From The Loop*, but I felt that it was a little closed off, storywise. Some may find *Slugblaster* the opposite; you are dimension-hopping across an endless multiverse; alien ruins, cyberpunk towercities and galactic forest prisons are all equally possible. The book provides plenty of starting ideas for the GM, with adventure hooks, locations, problems and checkpoints for a deep dive or a single visit, plus explanation of how to create new worlds on the fly. At the same time, having to return home in time to finish that college essay in, or to put the bins out like you promised your step-mum, keeps the game very grounded, in a way everything-including-the-kitchen-sink settings like *Rift's* Megaverse often fail to do.

The ruleset, appropriately enough, is a hacked version of *Blades in the Dark* by John Happer. It's been modded a bit, much like that pair of LED cybershorts in your backpack. The rebuild means the game can mechanically reward the cool 'style' of doing a hoverboard handstand as you exit the Headteacher's office window, and allows it to crash you heavily down to earth with chores, weekend jobs and homework during the 'downtime' between adventure 'runs'.

The rules are pretty straightforward, although they'll require a little mental fluidity to those of you used to rolling a d20 every time your PC does anything. The focus here is more on building a narrative together, rolling

when it adds drama to the story, and adding flair or tension by building the risk – and resulting pay-off – for your characters. Using a six-sided dice pool, your characters succeed on a 6, gain a mixed success on 4-5 and fail on a 1-3; but what that means exactly will be decided by the GM.

Free to download, the character guides and cheat-sheet PDFs cover any heavy lifting involved in running the game; with a rules reference that fits on a single A4 sheet. It's done well, and the book sensibly portions off advanced and optional aspects for those that want them. The 'Running The Game' section is particularly good, simply and logically explaining concepts like tone and pacing in a manner that demonstrates a capable understanding of the system – and of how those pesky real-life humans will interact with it.

Most importantly, there's a party generator inside for that illegal rave your friend told you about that's happening on Saturday night. It made me feel 20 years younger and a thousand years old at the same time. My only niggle here is that I wish the somewhat flimsy cover was printed on thicker stock – but I am absolutely nit-picking; *Slugblaster* is a whale of a time; a unique, intriguing idea delivered with a visual flair that adds to the experience tremendously. 🍷

CHRIS LOWRY

PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY

We all wish we'd been different people in high school. If you'd like to do it again with a ray gun, atomic shoelaces and somehow still have to work a thursday night job in your local video rental store? Well, *Slugblaster* is the one for you.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SPIRE...

Rowan Rook and Decard's *Spire* uses the Resistance system, which brings out a similar style of narrative play, although it trades *Slugblaster's* secondary school antics for bleak existence of aelfir revolutionaries. Adrian Stone's artwork is stunning too.



SANDWICH MASTERS

A Slice of Silliness That Will Cause Salt

Designer: Nich Angell, Lucy Brown, Jon Lock, Alice White | **Publisher:** Big Punch Studios



has amassed 50 Noshbucks (or 10 money cards) earned by completing sandwich orders through playing out ingredient cards. The trick is that players can play multiple ingredients a turn if they're all the same, seeing players slam down a row of bread before slathering them with sauces, meats, cheese and many more delectable fillings.

Of course, there are some fillings which wouldn't normally come under the category of "delectable." Sure, this bacon might be zebra-patterned and this egg is a little hairy, but sometimes it's unavoidable and players must risk the wrath of a health inspector being played on them if it means hurriedly finishing an order before someone else.

In addition to dodgy ingredients you can use to cut corners, there are also outright "attack condiments" you can sling into an opponent's sandwich, such as the aforementioned broken glass, depleted uranium and many other silly things that I won't spoil but definitely got a few laughs when played. Weirdly enough, you can still send a sandwich out to finish an order provided everything else is correct, just hope that the customer doesn't

notice when their hot dog is glowing a shade of vibrant green.

Whilst randomness is front and centre when it comes to the game's core means of winning (from drawing the right ingredients you need to having the perfect new order card show up from the deck) there are still many means of impacting the game's outcome. Instead of playing cards, you can instead discard as many as you want from hand, as you always draw back up to seven cards and will no doubt eventually find the tomato you need. Plus, as players get closer to victory they'll stop playing as many risky cards, slowing them down and giving the others a chance to catch up.

Despite these means of controlling the madness, inevitably one or more players will be confounded with bad luck that will rob them of any chance of making further progress. Spending turn after turn meticulously fashioning the perfect high value cheesesteak, only to have someone sell a cheap ham sandwich and reveal the Alien Abduction event, clearing all orders and making the cheesesteak worthless, is not a great feeling. You have to be prepared to lose the game through no fault of your own, with the fun mainly found in the genuinely amusing card art and sandwich-based *schadenfreude*.

If this sounds to your taste, then *bon appetit*. If, however (like me) you would rather your free time wasn't spent on something that won't blow up in your face halfway through, this morsel is worth sending back to the chef. 🍷

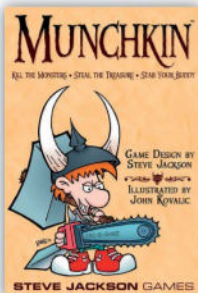
MATTHEW VERNALL

Here's a little taster, a sample of my experience with *Sandwich Masters*. I'm playing with three friends, one of which is in the lead. My two other friends take umbrage with this, whisper something together and cackle. Just before first place can take another step closer to victory, a bunch of broken glass is shoved into their crowning culinary creation. The other player then slams down a strict health inspector card. First place takes a moment to decide whether they want to lose half of their points, or throw away their entire array of half finished sandwiches. They take the third option, throwing their remaining cards to the table and hanging up their metaphorical apron.

Sandwich Masters is that sort of zany, "Take-That" laden game with its tongue firmly lodged 'twixt its cheek. The rulebook doesn't explicitly have a set win condition, but multiple sources online recommended that the game be played until one player



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?
▶ 200 Game cards



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MUNCHKIN...

The granddaddy of "games where you screw over your friends for fun," whilst there's a bazillion different versions for this room raiding classic, *Sandwich Masters* delivers a fresh theme that's considerably more accessible for newer players to the hobby.

DOM PIERRE

No pague no gain

Designer: Rola & Costa | Publisher: Pile Up Games



I'm going to address the elephant in the room and clarify early on that this is a game about making Champagne, not wine, as at first glance *Dom Pierre* strongly resembles Stonemaier Games' classic *Viticulture*, and to a lesser extent, Vital Lacerda's *Vinhos*. But when considering these aesthetic, thematic, and even generic similarities, *Dom Pierre* interestingly opens up musings on how well mechanical innovations can aid such a game in setting itself apart.

Thankfully, *Dom Pierre* flaunts its differences immediately with a turn structure guided by a unique action selection mechanism. Taking the form of a matrix on each players' winery board, action selection follows a process of moving one of six discs associated with each action up one step before carrying it out. Where this disc is positioned will ultimately determine how many times that action can be performed, whilst the location of a player's lowest disc in the matrix determines how much it will cost. Only the first three actions in the

matrix actually incur a cost; Vineyard, Cellar, and Village, but as you'd expect they're crucial. The trick lies in figuring out how best to increase the strength of particular actions whilst holding back on performing certain others to keep costs down.

There's many routes to success, but the general gameplay loop prioritises first gathering grapes – either harvested direct from the fields or purchased from the village – pressing them into bottles or barrels, and then selling to one of four markets. How efficiently this is done depends on both the timing of these actions as well as how players supplement them with actions boosting the appeal of their Champagne. Largely this is achieved through the logistics action, which not only expands players' workforces but also allows for the redistribution of workers across the vineyards, presses, and trade routes. Workers in the vineyard, for example, increase the quality of grapes harvested, whilst those gathered along trade routes boost sale values

depending on how far along they are, as well as collecting precious francs upon the workers' removal.

A savvy, constant awareness of the demands of each market and the various available goal cards is essential and managed in a way that maintains player engagement. Aside from potentially offering some short time goals or strategic guidance, goal cards can also be snapped up by observant players to net quick points based on their current circumstances. The ever-shifting market cards will also reward careful planning as each one details whether bottles or barrels are required alongside bonuses when supplying from particular presses.

As the game progresses, the importance of the action selection system is rendered increasingly clear upon the realisation of how scarce money is. Admittedly, Champagne wasn't popular – and consequently, lucrative – until the 18th century. Thus, in keeping with this history, players in *Dom Pierre* are competing for prestige rather than coin. What results is a game that feels consistently tight and restrictive; qualities that players will either embrace or bounce off of depending on their gaming preferences. Personally, whilst the pervasive feeling of never having enough money felt depressingly apposite, this tight design invitingly beckons you to figure it out. On the other hand, the looming threat of analysis paralysis is likely to rear its head even at early stages of the game.

Regardless of tastes, it's hard to deny the exquisitely orchestrated balance and cleverness of *Dom Pierre*'s tightly interwoven mechanics and potentially punishing gameplay. It's certainly a far cry from *Viticulture*'s relative accessibility, so players looking for a more serious venture should find plenty to wet their whistle here. 🍷

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? YES



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ Prestige board
- ▶ 51 Grapes
- ▶ Cloth bag
- ▶ 24 Action discs
- ▶ 8 Scoring markers
- ▶ 36 Workers
- ▶ 45 Harvest tiles
- ▶ 40 Champagne tiles
- ▶ 32 Accessory tokens
- ▶ 16 Prestige tokens
- ▶ 49 Goal cards
- ▶ 12 Vintage tokens
- ▶ 18 Modifier tokens
- ▶ 5 Ratio tiles
- ▶ 28 Coins
- ▶ 60 Market cards
- ▶ 2 Information sheets



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED VITICULTURE

A more refined and full-bodied approach to the theme.





DRAGONLANCE: WARRIORS OF KRYNN

Revenge of the Soth

Designer: Rob Daviau, Stephen Baker | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

One of the most appealing things about finally bringing '80s campaign setting *Dragonlance* into the 5E fold is the chance it provides modern *D&D* players to engage in the epic War of the Lance. This Krynn-shaking event – which involves the return of both the high-fantasy world's gods and some legendary fire-breathing creatures known as 'dragons' – envisions a kind of swords-and-sorcery equivalent of World War II breaking out in Europe. And Wizards of the Coast has provided two different ways for us to experience the drama – which can, intriguingly, be combined.

The first is *Shadow of the Dragon Queen*: a level 1-11 adventure, whose big battles can be experienced by player-character groups in their own focused corner of each conflict. The second is *Warriors of Krynn*, a midweight co-op war game co-designed by Rob Daviau (of *Pandemic Legacy* fame) and Stephen Baker (of *HeroQuest* fame), which enables you to play out those conflicts on a grander scale, tracking the ebb and flow of a battle from the front lines while your heroes contend with their own tasks as war rages around them.

Coming with its own set of characters, *Warriors of Krynn* can



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 6 Hero figures
- ▶ 6 Hero boards
- ▶ 130 Plastic markers
- ▶ 9 Double-sided battle tiles
- ▶ 22 Double-sided adventure tiles
- ▶ 7 Custom dice
- ▶ 106 Tokens
- ▶ 323 Cards
- ▶ Key moment tracker
- ▶ Scenario book
- ▶ Rulebook



easily be played as a stand-alone game; either as a tracked campaign – it has 12 scenarios – or in of one-off sessions. But it's also possible to integrate into the *Shadow of the Dragon Queen* campaign. When given a prompt by the book, a DM can pull out *Warriors of Krynn*, set it up, and import their player characters into the board game, with instructions on how its outcomes will affect them back in *D&D*.

At first, it feels odd shifting from the full character immersion of an RPG to the rather more abstracted and overviewy nature of the board game. Especially when your character sheet, with all its detail and nuance, is substituted with a just a character-class card and a few ability cards. Also, there is the awkward matter of what the DM does. They can either join in as an extra player (assuming there aren't already five players in their group), or just handle the nasty Dragon Armies, which basically reduces them to the role of a caretaker and narrator, with little agency. And if your *D&D* group has more than five players? Tough.

Fortunately, this significant flaw is

mitigated somewhat by the fact that *Warriors of Krynn* is damn fun to play. Each turn, a player has four actions, *Pandemic* style, plus a few free actions their class may give them, during which they can move around the battlefield, dealing with 'Vile Champions', assisting the goodie Allied commanders, and attempting to pull off their mission objectives. Then they determine the next bout of the battle, which usually involves the Dragon Armies whaling on the poor, often overwhelmed Allied defenders, before the next player takes their turn. Interestingly, often the point is not so much to win the battle as just achieve what you need to before things go *too* wrong.

After a few games, those integrating with *D&D* will naturally start to bring some role-play to the table, responding to each event as their characters



would; while a good DM should really tweak the scenario book's cursory text to tailor their own campaign. Because Daviau and Baker's system is quite simple and abstracted, the blending of RPG and BG will feel more organic and player-led, and this is to the benefit of the experience.

Of course, it won't be for everyone. And it doesn't have to be. *Shadow of the Dragon Queen* is perfectly playable without this (very expensive) boxed add-on. And, despite the fact that its components are disappointingly low quality for the price, *Warriors of Krynn* is fine to play without the *D&D* part; you won't feel like you're missing anything, and you'll likely whip through its enjoyable campaign. It is a bit of a treat to experience Krynn on such a different scale. ●

DAN JOLIN

PLAY IT? YES

Whether combining with *Shadow of the Dragon Queen* or tackling it as a stand-alone experience, it's an entertaining co-op fantasy wargame. Easy to multi-hand, too, if you wanted to try it solo.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED THE GRIZZLED...

Though the setting is a world [war] away, it's another co-op war game with a strong character focus.

CRUSADERS: THY WILL BE DONE

Welcome to the knight shift

Designer: Seth Jaffee | Publisher: Renegade Games



Nowadays, it's considered impolite to gallop around Europe on horseback, murdering people for religious purposes. But back in days of yore it was simply how people said hello. Or it was at least, if you were a templar.

In *Crusaders: Thy Will Be Done*, you play a knight committed to a religious order and even more committed to continental travel and war. You earn points by sending knights across Europe like so many 14th Century takeaway drivers, only instead of garlic bread and dirty cajun wedges they bring death to the Slavs and the Prussians, along with the occasional church.

higher level buildings once they're uncovered. If you take the Crusade action, you're going to be able to defeat stronger enemies.

This rondel system means you can rarely do exactly what you want without some planning. You'll have to build up tokens on actions where you need more power, while spending tokens on actions that don't cost much. You can also boost your actions by building churches, banks, farms and castles, which give you permanent bonuses, or by spending a turn to upgrade a slice itself, in which case you flip it, and now you can choose from two actions instead of one, even splitting your tokens

thumping heart of a euro, but it's not heavy. At most, if we're talking 'weight' as a measure of complexity, it's on the light end of medium – maybe even the heavier end of gateway. There's definite variability in terms of where armies and building bonuses appear on the board, and in terms of your templar order's powers, but the gameplay loop is very simple. Resolve an action, redistribute the appropriate tokens, pass.

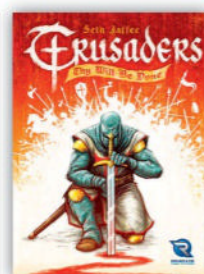
And the game is not bad. There's nothing wrong with it. But. Hmm. For all the setup time, and the promise of actions that wax and wane like the rhythm of the tides, the final experience is a bit underwhelming. The production is gorgeous – individual wooden castles and churches you take off your player board to reveal permanent bonuses, cardboard tiles showing your order that slot into a gap above your rondel. It's beautifully put together, and when you first start dropping tokens round your rondel you feel like every choice is going to matter.

But it doesn't. Not really. There's just such an abundance of stuff. Enemies on every map location. Discounts for building particular structures. You can even take an action that just gives you points at a simple, one-for-one exchange rate for tokens. It should feel like a buffet but it's more like choosing between twelve different colours of parking space.

Crusaders is perfectly fine, but I'm not sure who it's for. There's very little interaction, you can do so much to mitigate the limitations of your rondel that planning doesn't really matter, and even with variable powers most games follow a similar path. It feels like having a race to see who can eat the most peas. I like peas well enough, but I wouldn't pay nearly fifty quid for the privilege.

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? MAYBE



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 10 Knight order tiles
- ▶ 13 Knight meeples
- ▶ 64 Building tokens
- ▶ 24 Action wedges
- ▶ 20 Troop tokens
- ▶ 30 Building bonus tiles
- ▶ 52 Action tokens
- ▶ 32 Enemy tokens
- ▶ 6 Enemy majority award tiles
- ▶ 60 Influence tokens
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ Two-sided game board

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SCYTHE...

Crusaders may have – very – distant cousins in games like *Wolves* and *Scythe*, inasmuch as you're pootling round a central board while taking wooden things off your player board to reveal permanent bonuses. It plays much quicker than most games in the genre, so if you want a compact, less demanding experience, this may fill that niche.



Each turn, you're going to pick one of the six slices on your action wheel, do the action or actions associated with that slice, then pick up the tokens on that slice and drop them one at a time around the rest of the wheel in a clockwise order. The more tokens you pick up, the more powerful the action is. So, for example, if you take the Travel action, more tokens mean you can move farther, and move more knights. If you take the Build action, you're going to be able to Build

between them to perform two actions in a turn.

If this all sounds a bit euro-y, it is – *Crusaders*, for all its trappings of tactical warfare, is a game about grabbing points and boosting your ability to score points. There's no randomness after setup, and no hidden information. Which is not a criticism – this is simply a game that takes its theme in a direction you might not expect.

Crusaders might have the



NAMIJI

From road to sea

Designer: Antoine Bauza | **Publisher:** Funforge



Namiji is the next instalment in the *Tokaido* universe and a standalone game in its own right. Players need not have played *Tokaido* before – handy, as there's likely to be a wash of first-time gamers, what with it being a relatively elderly ten years old. If anything, it's possibly an advantage to come to *Namiji* fresh – if only to appreciate the game's impeccable aesthetic.

Rather than a journey by land, *Namiji* sets sail across an archipelago geographically shy of the *Tokaido* road. Using boat meeples, players travel on a circular path broken up by several docks where they must take a rest, collect special ability cards and determine turn order for the next part of the voyage. Within each section, players decide how far ahead they move each turn but they'll need to remember that the person in last position gets to go first. And there is no going back either. Racing ahead may initially sound like an advantage, but it actually results in long waits for your next turn, as well as missing out on a multitude of ways to score points.

Indeed, the net is cast wide for



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ 5 Boat boards
- ▶ 5 Boat tokens
- ▶ 5 Score counters
- ▶ 60 Panorama cards
- ▶ 3 Panorama bonus cards
- ▶ 20 Dock cards
- ▶ 20 Sacred Rock cards
- ▶ 20 Offering tokens
- ▶ 50 Crustacean tokens
- ▶ 48 Fish tokens
- ▶ 12 Net tokens
- ▶ 5 Early Bird tokens
- ▶ Cloth bag



catching points. Games are effectively won by balancing each opportunity. Fill up your fish rack by stopping at the angling station to reel in a whopper (get them in the same kind and colour for even more points). Make an offering at the whirlpool station to offset negative points. Push your luck by deep-diving into the blind bag of crustaceans – just don't get crabs...

Probably the most intriguing endeavour is set-collecting panorama cards. In *Tokaido*, these were breathtaking snapshots of the Edo-era landscape. Here it's sea creatures – dolphins, an octopus and a whale – captured in such a way that would mesmerise even David Attenborough. These are also a profitable way to score (each section of the panorama creature has an ascending value) so competition is fierce – especially as the first player to complete them gets a bonus. Such images are beguiling, but be warned: it takes a lot of effort to

complete all three animals, and they are by no means enough to win the game. It's a clever, siren-like device to lure players off-course.

Beauty is obviously subjective but surely most people will agree this is a very attractive game. Crisp whites and pale shades go easy on the eye, providing a powerful backdrop for intense bursts of colour. It could even be argued that *Namiji* is more beautiful than the mother game. Card backs are equally as attractive as card fronts, the meeple boats are perfectly cut, while illustrated waves pay homage to Hokusai's woodblock art. And although it's more traditional in shape, *Namiji* improves upon *Tokaido*'s awkwardly long-but-thin board (complete with a path that's one dodgy print-run away from being lost). Sadly, the points tracker has not been rethought, and remains confusingly zigzaggy.

A larger board shape is something that will be comfortably familiar to newcomer or casual gamers, who are likely to be the target market. It makes a particularly strong crossover title for those testing the waters of hobby games, without leaving behind familiar elements such as path trails. Super-simple to teach and learn, players can be competitive even on the first run-through and its plausible that smart kids younger than 8 could even get involved. Just as *Tokaido* was praised for being zen, *Namiji* offers similar thoughtful moments of contemplation – something parents and carers will no doubt appreciate over other more confrontational titles.

Because it only takes one or two plays to crack, *Namiji* isn't really a heavy-weight game for seasoned players. Yet its lightness of touch, quick set-up and picturesque design make it refreshing to dip in and out of. ●

JENNY COX

PLAY IT? YES

An undeniable looker: *Namiji* works best as a gateway from mainstream titles into the hobby, whilst doubling as a quick-play palette cleanser for the more experienced.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: TOKAIDO...

Stating the obvious, but fans of *Namiji*'s predecessor will be intrigued to carry out a compare-and-contrast – and may end up preferring the spin-off.

YOSEMITE

A tiny trek for two

Designer: Tim Blank | Publisher: WizKids



A copy of Ansel Adam's *Sierra Nevada* lives in my bathroom. When nature calls, I can sit atop my private porcelain summit, gazing at the landscape rolling before me in all its starkly monochromatic beauty. In this way, I leave this place as a man both emptier yet more fulfilled. Thankfully, the geological drama of America's photogenic rocky west can be enjoyed on the tabletop too, most recently with Tim Blank's *Yosemite*.

Adapted from his earlier design *Bumúntú*, *Yosemite* is a tile-based, two-player set collection game with an intriguing movement mechanic. Thematically players are rival photographers hoping to please judges with photos of various animals at famed locations within the national park.

Animal tiles will be gathered up by traversing a five by five grid, with the tile taken determining the specific movement pattern available to them. Cougars for example will pounce straight to the edge of the grid in any direction, moving an opponent if they pass over or land on them. The colour of the tile (and its symbol) determines the subsequent action a player will take, with blue gathering fish, white moving the camp token, and green offering the chance to snap a photo by discarding the animal tiles displayed on one of the two displayed photo cards.

Whilst taking photos is the main goal here, extra points can be snapped up through the tug-of-war like manipulation of the camp track. Fish, on the other hand, can be consumed at the start of the turn to manoeuvre players' meeples on to the animals and actions they need. Of the five animals, three can interfere

with opponents, but in practice this never amounts to much of a threat. Furthermore, none of the movement patterns or micro-aggressions translate well thematically, and at times even feel fiddly and arbitrary. There are no player aids demonstrating animal movement, and ultimately players are bound to achieve something useful, whatever their situation.

You'd think, but no. Even with the affiliation of Beth Sobel and her fantastic illustrative work, *Yosemite* stumbles by tragically pairing her up with Shutterstock. The result is an aesthetic comparable to stickers stuck on coloured card stock.

Even the photo cards players are striving for fail to convey that this is actually a game about creating beautiful images of animals in national parks. I'm all for functional clarity but surely there's an alternative to animal clip art recurring incongruously atop a white plank floating before a scenic



Another niggle is the unpredictability of the photo goal cards and landmark tiles. When landmarks come into play, their tokens can be grabbed to score bonus points based on how many photos were taken in that location. The problem is that only half of the deck of photo cards are used, making it entirely possible for at least one landmark to yield no points at all. In the context of a duelling puzzle game, falling prey to this sort of bad luck doesn't feel great.

So the mechanical experience and application of theme may be somewhat lacking, but given its setting, surely it's at least pretty?

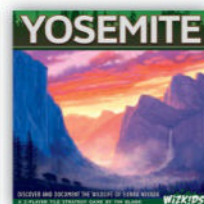
backdrop. A touch of variety wouldn't have caused much confusion; most people know what a bear looks like.

Nonetheless, and despite its flaws, a quick game of *Yosemite* isn't an unpleasant experience. Like a walk in nature, there's a meditative mindfulness to its simple gameplay loop. Granted, it's not the sort of hike to evoke awe or inspiration, but sometimes a trundle around a local but unfamiliar park is all the soul needs. 🐾

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? MAYBE

A functional yet uninspired use of a fantastic theme.

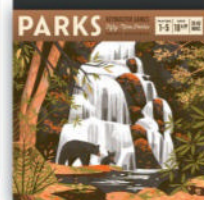


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game Board
- ▶ 45 Animal tiles
- ▶ 5 Landmark tiles
- ▶ 5 Landmark tokens
- ▶ 2 Fish tokens
- ▶ 10 Tent tokens
- ▶ Camping token
- ▶ 2 Pawns
- ▶ 20 Photo cards
- ▶ 5 Judge cards

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PARKS...

Both of these set-collection games would sit quite nicely on the shelves of a touring Winnebago.



COOKING CUSTOMERS

Designer: David Schneider | **Publisher:** Good Enough Games

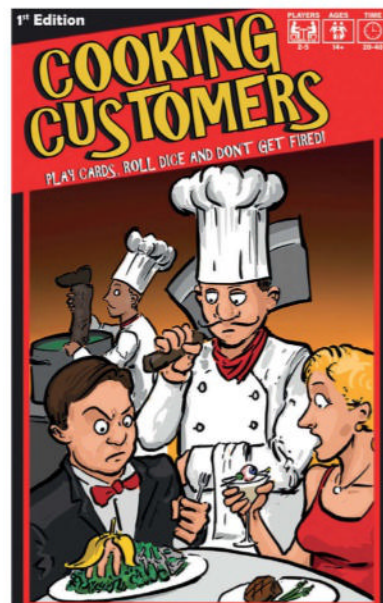
Usually, you can rely on board games about cooking or food to make your mouth water. Go *Nuts For Donuts* – looks delicious! *Chai* – I need to brew myself a hot cuppa. *Sushi Go!* – sushi, now! *Cooking Customers*, however, goes dramatically the other way. This game sees players competing against each other to earn the most tips by serving meals to customers. The tips don't depend on the quality of the food but rather the speediness of the service. So, the game's focus is much more on the running of the business, or rather accident management. Throughout the game players will try to sabotage their opponents by playing cards that will cause their cooks to quit, or prompt an unwelcome visit from health inspector or cause a horrible injury in the kitchen.

The latter causes actual physical unease while playing the game. The descriptions of each injury are paired

with unpleasant illustrations that can easily make you shudder. It's not that the art style is bad, it's perfectly nice when it's not depicting gruesome double-hand amputations by a meat grinder. It just tried to straddle that fine line of macabre humour, similar to games like *Exploding Kittens*, but didn't get it right.

The gameplay also doesn't really inspire a second serving. A lot of the game depends on luck: whether you will serve the table that give you nice tips, or whether you will get the right cards to sabotage your opponent, or whether you will roll enough 'meal' results on your dice. Although, you can tip your fortune by playing bonus cards on yourself, to give extra dice rolls or cure injuries, it will be up to luck to draw them in the first place. Unfortunately, *Cooking Customers* feels both too lucky and too icky to put on top of the table again. ❌

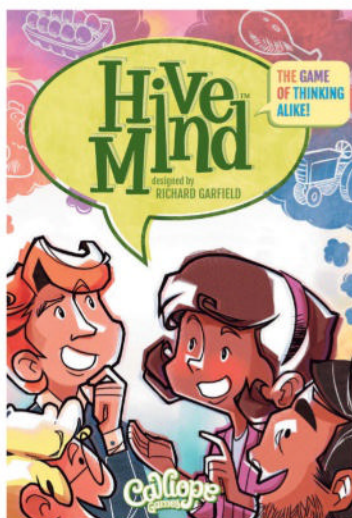
ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA



PLAY IT? NO

HIVE MIND

Designer: Richard Garfield | **Publisher:** Calliope Games



They say great minds think alike, and flexing those great minds is what *Hive Mind* is all about. In this party game, players compete against each other in answering

questions, but being a know-it-all isn't the goal. What players need to do instead, is write answers that other players will think of as well.

The more your answers match with other players around the table, the more points you score. If, for example, the question was 'name five different planets' and you wrote 'Pluto' as one of the answers (which is wrong, sorry, Pluto), but other players wrote it as well, you still score points. Standing out is the last thing you want to do. You may even get the answer wrong on purpose if you think others might write it down too for some reason.

Coming up with most likely answers is not as easy as it seems. Sometimes your most obvious response is not someone else's, or you can find that some people interpreted a particularly open-ended question differently to you. In a way, *Hive Mind* is an interesting



social experiment and you are bound to learn fascinating things about the people sitting around the same table. It also helps that technically, there are no wrong answers. No pressure to answer something in the right way or know some obscure piece of trivia. Of course, playing with your group of friends, whose responses you can attempt to predict is also a bonus. Like in most social games, the better your group gels together the more fun you are likely to have. However, *Hive Mind* makes it easy for everyone to bond and even get to know each other. Each card has plenty of questions to choose from, varying in topics, seriousness and complexity. This keeps the whole game light, fun and easy-going, both a perfect icebreaker or a hilarious end to the night. ❌

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? YES



TERRACOTTA ARMY

Str The emperor's new model army ap

Designer: Przemyslaw Fornal & Adam Kwapinski | Publisher: Board & Dice



Nearly fifty years ago, a farmer was digging a well with his five brothers and a neighbour when his spade struck something hard. Buried in the earth was a terracotta head that they first thought was from a statue of the Buddha. As it turned out, under the fields of persimmon and pomegranates was a vast army of thousands of life-sized clay warriors, including some on horse-drawn chariots, and a mausoleum the size of an ancient city.

In *Terracotta Army* you take the role of Third Century BCE artisans, charged with constructing the huge clay army that will accompany Emperor Qin Shi Huang into the afterlife (perhaps a little earlier than he would have preferred, given that he drank wine laced with mercury, believing it was one of the secrets to longevity). Each turn, you're going to acquire clay and use it to create various statues before placing them in the mausoleum.

What you build matters, but not as much as where and when. There's a big grid where you place your warriors. Inspectors patrol the tomb, checking your work, which in game terms means that whichever row and column the Inspector pawns are on in the Scoring Phase of each round is what you score for. You get points for having contributed to that area – having Presence – but you score even more for having contributed the most to that

area – having Domination. But neither matter unless an Inspector is strolling past at that moment and checks! Typical bureaucratic nonsense.

Terracotta Army is a game with two core mechanics. One is this scramble for mausoleum real estate and majorities. There are different types of statue, like the Officer or the Crossbowman, as well special statues like the Musician or the Horse, that have special effects, such as allowing you to nudge an Inspector along a space, or offering scoring bonuses to other statues placed in certain positions.

The other part of the game takes place on an action wheel, which consists of three rings divided into segments depicting different actions, such as taking some coins or clay, promoting your Craftsman worker to a more powerful Artisan, or constructing a statue. These rings turn independently, creating different combinations of three actions, which you may perform in order from the centre outwards. By paying coins before you place your worker, you can rotate one of the rings one step, thus changing the choices on offer.

This is one game where a heap of lovingly-sculpted miniatures feels thematically justified. Coloured bases let you see who built what at a glance, and the storage system for the minis is terrific. These sound like small pluses but they help give the game real table presence.

In a sentence, *Terracotta Army* marries the banana of worker placement with the Nutella of area control. The emphasis is probably on the latter – while the Action Wheel is a welcome novelty, the real brow-furrowing happens over in the mausoleum, as you jostle for key spaces while trying to anticipate what might earn you points down the road. You can strategise – sort of – but the board state is so fluid, especially with the shifting frame of reference of the two Inspectors, that you're dooming yourself to madness if you don't focus on responding to the situation as it stands when your turn rolls round.

The key is trying to wring out as much value as possible from each turn, making sure you have the resources to take advantage of a statue's special ability when you place it, and trying to mitigate losses in areas where you're not as dominant. And this is the thing – your choices feel consequential and your dilemmas feel interesting. If you or your friends are vulnerable to analysis paralysis, beware – there's scope for endlessly calculating likely returns on one of twenty different options – but if you like thinky, positional gaming that isn't, once you're into it, actually too overwhelming rules-wise, *Terracotta Army* is a peach. Or maybe a persimmon.

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? YES



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game board
- ▶ Warrior organiser box
- ▶ 2 Action rings
- ▶ 12 Scoring tokens
- ▶ 90 Clay tokens
- ▶ 90 Coin tokens
- ▶ 16 Weapon tokens
- ▶ 20 Craftsmen
- ▶ 20 Artisans
- ▶ 2 Inspectors
- ▶ 8 Player disks
- ▶ 13 Officers
- ▶ 13 Archers
- ▶ 13 Guards
- ▶ 13 Soldiers
- ▶ 4 Horses
- ▶ 4 Musicians
- ▶ 4 Footmen
- ▶ 4 Kneeling archers
- ▶ 60 Coloured bases

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TZOLK'IN: THE MAYAN CALENDAR...

If you enjoy heavier euros like *Tzolk'in* but like the idea of a central focus point guiding your play, this is going to tickle your fancy and then some. Fans of the positional grid play and rich theme of *Tang Garden* might well get a kick out of the extra crunch *Terracotta Army* brings to the table.





LONGBOARD

Wipeout the competition

Designer: Reiner Knizia | **Publisher:** 25th Century



The ability of board games to take us out of our ordinary lives is never more prevalent than in *Longboard*. The opening premise (“It’s a beautiful day at the beach...”) is especially far from this reviewer’s reality at the time of play (“It’s p*****g it down in the city...”).

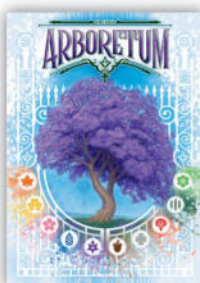
In this sunshine-in-a-box card game, players have the arduous task of imagining themselves as owners of surfboard-shaping shops, competing to become the best in a gloriously tropical town. Boards are built using one of four colours, and in ascending number order up to eight. The game is then scored on how many stickers there are on each board, as well as through four objectives. Faithfully taking about 20 minutes to play, it’s easy to dismiss *Longboard* as being too flimsy but there are enough frothy ideas bubbling under the surface to test the old grey cells.

The basic set up is a good example. Each player starts out with two cards in their supply, and must add any new cards drawn from the deck directly into this area before being allowed to place them. The tricky bit comes that everyone can take cards from



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 80 Board cards
- ▶ 16 Beach cards
- ▶ 14 Objective cards



everyone’s supplies (a bit like in *Fort*, another hand-management title, except here players need to swap out the card they want with a card/cards of a higher value). Because players are only afforded two actions on a turn, it becomes increasingly harder to both place and hold onto cards – literally forcing your hand on making impossible choices.

Deck drawing obviously suggests luck may be overly present, but it has been mitigated in two ways. Firstly, there is more than one version of each card (although there are fewer cards in each colour from 1-3, and also 6-8). Savvy opponents can use this to their advantage: the rules permit repeat numbers, so one person could hog both orange eights, for example. Secondly, are the wild boards that can be placed on any colour (but not used to start a new board). There’s only one of each, however, so you’ll need to jump on them fast when they appear. Wild board cards come without

stickers, so are best used for completing the “longest board” objectives.

Sixteen is a generous number of objectives for a game of this size and the selection creatively covers every element of the game whether it’s the supply, colours or wild cards. The mix keeps players on their toes and throws up more dilemmas about which ones to pursue (some even conflict with one another “Fewest stickers on a board” and “Most stickers on a board”). It is possible to achieve multiple objectives if you play your cards right, and the three or four points earned make a sizeable difference. Certain objectives, particularly “Board with all values 1-8” are more realistically achieved with 3-4 players, however. That’s not to say the two-player game isn’t as successful. It’s just different: harder, more cut-throat.

You’ll need to stay aware of what other players are working on no matter how many people are at the table. This won’t be easy. Because of the way cards are stacked, stickers are hidden from view. Having a good memory helps, otherwise, make a mental note of any three-sticker boards you see players place as these are worth the most. The fact that anyone can end the game (done by having four boards, one of which must be seven or more cards long) often catches you out. Any unfinished boards, those being under four cards, are penalised with point deductions.

A word must be made to the game’s designer, Reiner Knizia. Yes, the Reiner Knizia, with his huge canon of work. Having recently reviewed another new release of his (the supposedly more complex *San Francisco*), this is surprisingly the better of the two. Besides, any game that gives you an excuse to make jokes about Sex Wax* is an automatic ‘Yes!’

JENNY COX

PLAY IT? YES

Seemingly shallow, *Longboard* has wave after wave of meaty decisions. It also looks like a trip to paradise for half an hour of escapism.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ARBORETUM...

Enjoyed getting lost in the numbered leafy paths of *Arboretum*? *Longboard* is a similar celebration of outdoor activity, and utilises set collection and hand management while adding interesting objectives.

PUNS OF ANARCHY

Designer: Evan Katz & Josh Roberts | **Publisher:** Charty Party



It's often said that puns are the lowest form of humour. If so, it's a fair prediction that games relying on puns for their humour would be the lowest form of games. *Puns of Anarchy* does its best to prove that theory correct. It is a party game for three or more players, with a disturbingly long play time of 30 to 90 minutes?! Anyone who submits themselves to an hour and a half of this part-planned word play probably deserves their fate.

The core mechanic gives players three wipe-clean cards, with well-known phrases on them, like 'Saving Private Ryan'. Armed with a pen, players must attempt to alter the cards into puns that fit a category. Thus 'Shaving Ryan's Privates' might fit a 'Bathroom' category, whilst 'Braving Irate Lion' could work for 'In The Zoo'. Players compete to write the funniest puns for each category. Laughter, apparently, ensues.


The flaw here is simple, obvious and

two-fold. Firstly, writing good puns is hard. Add in having to fit the puns into specific categories, and it becomes impossible to do with reliable success. Much of our games involved staring blankly at cards, eventually giving up and writing something that sort of fitted the category, but absolutely wasn't amusing.

Secondly, even fantastic, amazing, close-to-perfect puns are only ever about a 5/10 funny. A groan-with-a-reluctant-respect kind of funny. The sort of funny that works, occasionally, sprinkled into conversation between friends. A flimsy, light-weight humour that simply can't hold up under sustained assault. And remember, that's good puns. We were writing bad puns. Non-joke puns. Just words, that sort of fit. Ish. We read through the finished cards, and struggled to choose a winner for any category due to the absolute mediocrity of every entry.

I'm afraid *Puns of Anarchy* is not a

good game. There might, just about, be room for it in your house if you are a family of pun-makers - although it unfortunately makes the unwise decision to exclude children with mature themes on some cards. But yes, a group of die-hard, dedicated, adult-only pun-makers might have a few chuckles one evening, crafting masterful plays-on-words within the limitations the game provides you. For the rest of us? Avoid it. You'll only be pun-ishing yourself. Get it?

Of course you do. 

CHRIS LOWRY



PLAY IT? NO

NAASI: A COYOTE & CROW DICE GAME

Designer: Connor Alexander | **Publisher:** Coyote & Crow LLC




Naasi is a push-your-luck dice game by the designers of the Coyote and Crow roleplaying game. *Naasi* revolves around the pleasant tactility of rolling and rerolling a big handful of D12s to try and score a set or a run of numbers. Unfortunately, *Naasi* fails to build a satisfying game around this simple pleasure.

You start your turn by rolling three d12s. After each roll you may keep any results you wish before adding four extra dice to the pool and rerolling. The aim is to form either a set of matching numbers of a string of sequential numbers. However, among the new dice added for each reroll is a black 'Crow' die. Crow dice are scored as normal but any white dice matching the numbers on crow dice are discarded and, should any of your crow dice roll a twelve, you'll go bust, scoring zero for the round.

The best push-your-luck games slowly ramp up the tension, tempting you closer and closer to ruin with the promise of rich reward. Your gut and your brain fight it out as you decide whether to push on or turn back? Roll the dice or

cash out? Sadly, *Naasi* doesn't come close to achieving this. At their worst, the chances of going bust are somewhere between 20-25%. However, it's really less than that as the game has some safety nets that might save in the event you bust. It

becomes easy to completely forget about going bust and, when someone finally does, it feels abrupt and out of the blue rather than the result of looming consequences.

The rules also list a set of optional abilities that can be added but these only remove even more tension and make scoring even easier. What's more, presenting players with extra options on their turn only elongates an already overlong game. Sadly *Naasi*'s scoring mechanics don't make up for the tepid push-your-luck element. There are no Yahtzee-like combos, and once you realise it's easier to put together a run of numbers than a matching set, your first turns will look much like your last. 

GEORGE BARKER

PLAY IT? NO





BASILICA

Can be build it?

Designer: Lukasz M Pogoda | **Publisher:** Portal Games



Medieval Florence wants a sweet new church. However, in an embarrassing double-booking, both the bishop and the queen have hired different men to design it. Rather than risk telling her madge that her chosen designer sucks, the bishop goes ahead and lets both men build the church together. At various stages, the queen will arrive and judge their work, and whoever makes the best contribution will win. It's like a thunderdome for architects.

In game terms, this means taking tiles from a small tableau and either laying them out to construct the basilica, or playing them for the action on their reverse side. Adjacent tiles of the same colour form areas that score you points if you've placed the most builders in that area. Actions include promoting your builders to give them additional powers, placing extra builders, or moving your opponent's builders.

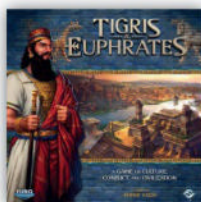
There are three scoring phases, triggered when the queen pawn reaches certain spaces on the scoring track. In each of these, you check who has majority control of each scoring area, award points accordingly, then remove the bottom two rows of tiles. And that's it. The entire game is this process of creating scoreable areas and vying for control over them.

Let's start with the bad – the central mechanic involves choosing a tile from either the top or bottom row of a six-tile tableau. If you take a tile



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 58 Cathedral tiles
- ▶ 8 Scaffolding tiles
- ▶ 16 Stained glass tokens
- ▶ 6 Promotion tokens
- ▶ 2 Score tokens
- ▶ 12 Wooden builder pawns
- ▶ Queen pawn
- ▶ 2 Wooden coins
- ▶ 2 Boards



from the bottom row, the tile above it gets flipped to take its place, then a new tile comes off the stack to replace that one. Since you take three actions per turn, including tiles you move from one row to the other or replace, you may be called upon to relocate between four and nine tiles every single turn.

This might not sound like much but it adds up. Contrast this with a turn in *Carcassonne*: draw a tile from the bag, place it. Turn done. In *Basilica*, placing a tile often triggers your having to move two more to reset the tableau. Multiplied over dozens of turns, this fiddly admin gets to be annoying and inelegant. It's a nagging distraction, pulling your focus away from the play area to part of the game that ought to be invisible.

That said, while this is bigger than a niggle it's smaller than a fatal flaw. Here are the good parts: *Basilica* is really fun. The area control is dynamic and engaging: do you want to focus on scoring one big area, or is it better to spread your builders wide and win multiple uncontested areas? Promotions for your builders include turning them into artisans, who count as two builders, or jesters, who can turn

the tile they're on an additional colour, changing the shape of the board and allowing them to contest two or even three areas simultaneously.

Even the bits you'd think might feel nasty, like moving one of your opponent's builders, in practice don't feel that bad at all. Though there's some luck involved in terms of what tiles you choose from, *Basilica* is tactical rather than strategic – you respond to the fluid board state and exploit opportunities, and the soft reset after the first and second scoring phases makes it unlikely that one player will attain an unassailable lead.



The double-sided tile mechanic, despite the annoying admin it generates, creates a bunch of depth. Since they drop from the top row to the bottom, you can see which colours are coming up and plan accordingly. It gives you some interesting, crunchy dilemmas – play this tile, and you'll lose the chance to do the action above it. But you might not want to take that action until you've played the tile. Argh!

The production is high quality, with some gorgeous wooden builders, and though the big blocks of primary colour don't exactly scream medieval Florentine basilica, it scarcely matters, because the central tussle is solid as a marble pillar. If you can overlook a bit of tile-flipping legwork, this is an accessible yet rewarding two-player title. 🍷

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? YES

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *TIGRIS & EUPHRATES*...

Basilica's fluid area control has hints of *Go* and might appeal if you're after a looser, less mathsy *Tigris & Euphrates*. While it might be gauche to compare a tile-laying game to ol' grandpappy *Carcassonne*, if you enjoy the tension around placing farmers and jockeying for majorities, *Basilica* has plenty to offer you.

WRECKLAND RUN

Scrapping your way to victory

Designer: Scott Almes | **Publisher:** Renegade Game Studios



The situation will immediately seem familiar. Wrenching your fast-moving vehicle under control as enemies appear and move around whilst you fire your machine gun or rocket launcher. *Wreckland Run* presents this type of gaming experience using dice placement.

You choose a vehicle and a driver from the four on offer, each with one simple skill. Each vehicle has eight spaces for parts surrounding and protecting a central core. If the central core takes full damage it explodes and that's game over. And despite your scavenging can-do attitude, it can't be repaired.

barbed wire and cause damage to enemies in a ram.

Completing this leads to a Run Phase in which you, a post-apocalyptic raider, try to escape the clutches of someone you have stolen a precious item from. A further proof read of the story journal wouldn't have gone amiss – “dulcet hooks” anyone? – Aw Shucks it's sure hard to tell when words are deliberately misspelt.

In a Run Phase enemy vehicles are placed on all sides and it's your job to remove them with guns. You roll all eight dice and firstly place one of the red dice, activating all

There are two key elements to this puzzle other than prioritising the most dangerous enemies. Firstly positioning. Activating enemies moves them once clockwise. Thankfully a ram and some installed parts will also move them, helping you position them in front of your biggest guns or away from vulnerable sides. This is essential in boss battles since bosses are usually invulnerable when flanked by allies. The second key feature is the “perfect kill”. If an enemy with 2 remaining health suffers 2 damage you take it into your hand as scrap. Scrap cards equal extra dice - and may activate unused parts, apparently multiple times if you have enough cards. This really distorts otherwise precise die manipulation and placement because it's easy to acquire scrap in early Run Phases to use later.

Once the enemy numbers are reduced to two, a new Wreckage Phase commences and the dice pool may be used to repair damage. After three Wreckage Phases and two Run Phases the boss appears. Bosses are not particularly dangerous, but they need to be carefully isolated. Defeating the boss wins the chapter.

The campaign comprises seven chapters, most of which add a few new enemies, parts or skills. The most interesting occurs midway and sees your agency severely fettered - no use of 3, no ramming, progressive damage of parts used etc. A real challenge in a specialist car such as the Thunderflash or Hades Chariot (the ramming Rhinohide is ruled out). Another has you simply outlast four turns. One has you protect a passenger. The finale has one final twist up its sleeve, which I won't spoil here, but it might be worth it. 📌

DEBBIE BROWN

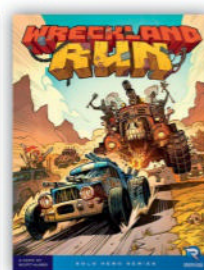
PLAY IT? MAYBE

A little too simple to reward extended play and the scrap mechanic adds excessive flabbiness to otherwise precise dice placement. Uneven campaign progression. Imprecise rulebook.



Each chapter starts with a Wreckage Phase where you draw parts and roll a dice pool of five white dice and three red dice to pay for their installation. You probably want to purchase several cheap parts rather than one luxury one, and to achieve a good spread of values and actions. Corner spaces are particularly useful since they cover two sides. Some parts are edged in

enemies of that value. Then place 1-3 of your white dice on vehicle parts. Placing the exact dice value on a part activates its bonus action. Dice may also be placed on the core to ram or for micro-manipulation. Re-roll and repeat twice until all dice are placed. Red dice which do not match enemy values are rolled on an illogical boss table. Then recover all dice and start a new turn.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 4 Vehicle mats
- ▶ Campaign book
- ▶ 7 Chapter envelopes
- ▶ 4 Driver cards
- ▶ 24 Enemy cards
- ▶ 8 Destruction cards
- ▶ 36 Parts cards
- ▶ 12 Upgrade cards
- ▶ 1 Round token
- ▶ 8 Dice
- ▶ Player aid

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED WASTE KNIGHTS...

Kit out your vehicle and have adventures in post-apocalyptic Australia.



DEADLY DINNER: KILLING WOODSTOCK

Turn on, tune in, drop dead

Designer: Lukas Setzke, Martin Student & Verena Wiechens | **Publisher:** Pegasus Spiele



The year is 1970, and 50-year-old self-professed guru Maha Mallaya is dead – murdered, no less, a year after Woodstock, in the midst of an attempt to recapture the spirit of the iconic festival. Ten dinner guests, from idealistic commune members to motorbike gang initiates, gather to figure out who was responsible – or to hide their own guilt.

Killing Woodstock is one of the growing genre of ‘dinner party in a box’ games, where you’re encouraged not just to sit down round a table but to lean in to an entire experience – inviting players in character, having them turn up in costume and then playing out the scenario over the course of an evening. This isn’t mandatory – Pegasus Spiele aren’t going to send armed agents rappelling through your skylight to ziptie you if you decide you’d prefer to adopt a less committed approach (I presume), but the kinds of players who are likely to find this the most fun are those who relish the idea of getting into character a bit, and creating some atmosphere.

You’ll also need seven to ten willing participants, as this is very much a party game. Before the event, each player gets some information about themselves, their background, and some secrets that maybe they’d prefer didn’t get out – including, possibly, the fact that they were responsible for bumping off the guru. You get character books, some notes in envelopes containing secrets, and a cardboard standee and place card for each character, so you can remember everyone’s names at a glance.

It’s tricky to go into too much detail about what happens during *Killing Woodstock*, as most of the game is about revealing secrets and uncovering clues, but broadly speaking, it takes place over three rounds, where you get to discuss the murder and ask each other questions. Between rounds, new information gets revealed, which



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 10 Character books
- ▶ 10 Invitation cards
- ▶ 10 Notes in envelopes
- ▶ 10 Character standees
- ▶ 10 Place cards
- ▶ Gameboard



may implicate certain guests or undermine an alibi. Your character might be innocent, but in classic murder mystery tradition they may have been with someone or doing something they’d rather the other guests didn’t find out about, so evasiveness or lies don’t necessarily equate to guilt.

Killing Woodstock and the *Deadly Dinner* series it forms a part of attempt to recreate the popular ‘murder mystery weekend’ in a format you can play at home. It calls back to classic parlour games and as such are an unimpeachable staple of the hobby’s core traditions. But is it good?

Well, certainly, as host you’re asked to do a lot of the thematic heavy-lifting yourself – making room for you and six to nine guests, presumably preparing food, sending out invitations, setting up a music playlist, making sure everyone understands how it’s going to work and then finding an outfit. All of which is neutral, rather than inherently good or bad – if the idea of assembling a soundtrack of Summer of Love classics and festooning your living room in mandala blankets sounds like a giggle, chances are you’re the target audience.

The game, such as it is, is pretty light – which again, is neither good nor bad, and makes it accessible to friends who might get bored by overly fiddly mechanics. You do a bit of roleplaying, you narrow your eyes at your fellow guests suspiciously, make some accusations and reveal new information. There’s a central board onto which you can place your character standees, tracking their alleged position at the time of the crime. If, after three rounds, you successfully identify the culprit, the group wins. If not, the murderer wins.

Whether you enjoy the process is highly dependent on whether it’s a good fit for your group. If you’re all extroverted aspiring thespians who love chewing the scenery, you might have a scream. It’s a one-and-done experience. Reasonable versus, say, a night out for ten at an escape room, but at close to thirty quid for a single playthrough, a premium product. If the theme and the prospect of hosting a murder mystery evening speak to your soul, by all means splash out. 🍷

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? MAYBE

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *UNLOCK!...*

If you enjoy escape-room-in-a-box style games like *Unlock!* or *Time Stories*, but want something with a lighter, party game feel, this might suit you. Also, if you’ve played and enjoyed Renegade games’ *Crimes & Capers* series, this is treads very similar ground.

ISLE OF IXX

'I Went To Ixx And All I Got Were These Bite Marks'

Designer: Skulffungus | Publisher: Games Omnivorous



Skulffungus is known mostly for their dungeon designs. These dungeons are cartoony, gross and... er... fungal? So, to get a book full of these isometrically presented spaces, places and an entire hex map is a winner for anyone who is already a fan. For the rest of you looking at this slim clothbound book (it really is lovely) you'll ask 'why this one?'

It's a rules light roleplaying game with everything you need for weeks of gaming on the titular island. There are big stomping dinosaurs, cunning and cautious mutants, mostly human survivor colonies and fish people to meet on your adventures. The game

engine is based on *Into The Odd* with its now classic D20-roll-under-stats system and the 'auto-hit' system.

Your players will start shipwrecked in one corner of the island, with an eternal storm raging around its shores, a little way out. The island offers many questions (like, why is everything so weird here?) and secrets to uncover. Each location, setting and hex has its own tables for generating a bit of chaos you explore – and it's all offered up in a light, fairly minimalist way.

The first part of the book is dedicated to the system and running the game – which feels like quite

a lot for an adventure of only 46 pages totally. But in truth these early starter kits, profane powers, and trinkets are what drive a lot of flavour of the island. The profane powers particularly are quite easily acquired and can lead to smart and interesting problem solving for your players.

Because players can get hold of these trinkets and powers quite quickly, there's a sense of speed to the game. With a mild spoiler here, there's also a number of portals on the island, whisking players from one side of the island to somewhere dangerous or interesting. Sometimes they're randomised, but others are just helpful ways to get around for adventurers. Usually a hex-crawl adventure has a sense of drawn-out exploration, but here players are quickly nipping about the island and getting to the meat of the adventure at hand. It's not that players can't linger and do as they wish, but that this sense of a 'island as dungeon' about the game, where nearly everything is interesting and quickly accessible.

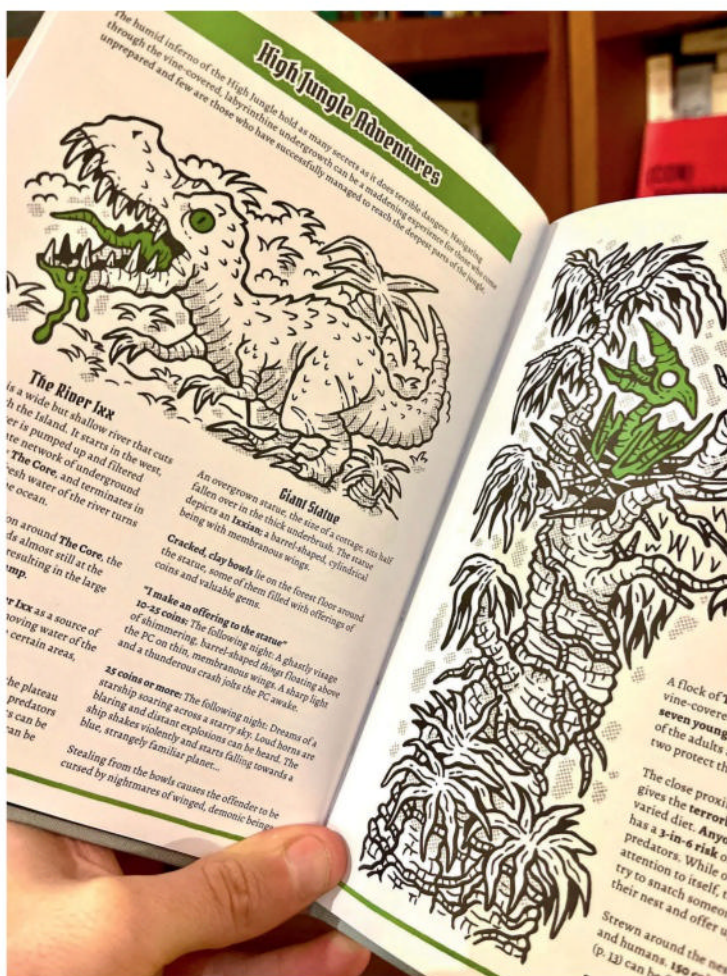
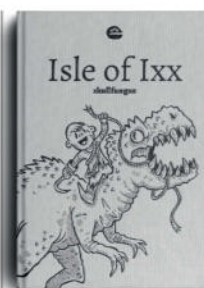
The gamebook also seems to want GMs to add to the island as they go, generating new dungeons and ruins to explore based on some random rolls and the use of 'spark' tables. There's even a few dungeons pre-drawn for you to photocopy and fill in at the back of the book. This might not be for everyone, but it's certainly an easy way in to designing your own content within a small sandbox.

A whimsical, somewhat deadly adventure for those who want a rules light, but big flavour game but contained within a smaller space. An excellent place for a little holiday, as long as you don't mind the dinosaurs.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

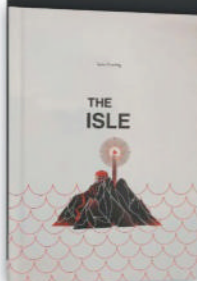
PLAY IT? YES

Another beautiful roleplaying book that exudes all the charm and love for the hobby that its creators have. Plus, it's a great way to get into hex-based adventures.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED THE ISLE...

Want another island to spend some time dying on? *The Isle* is the perfect dungeon delve for those brave enough to enter.



AUTOBAHN

No limits gaming

Designer: Fabio Lopiano & Nestore Mangone | **Publisher:** Alley Cat Games



Swallow that mouthful of tea and make sure you're sitting down before reading on: it's time to see who can make the biggest contribution to modernising haulage infrastructure in post-war Germany! If your skull hasn't been blown wide open by a surge of raw adrenaline, you may just ready to learn about *Autobahn*.

You and up to three friends – or even three enemies, if you're especially persuasive – are going to be working together to lay great veins of smooth macadam up and down the length of Germany, connecting cities to trading hubs across Europe. As the roads grow into a sleek web, you're going to send out your fleet of trucks, like busy spiders, carrying goods to your neighbours in Italy, Denmark and the Netherlands. And just like spiders, sometimes the drivers of those trucks will need to wee, so you can build service stations along each route, easing their journeys and earning yourself a welcome few Deutschmarks in the process.

Autobahn is a game about interdependent systems, and when you start, even if you're an avid Eurogame player, it might not be immediately apparent *why* you're doing what you're doing. If you like, you can spend some money to build some road. Great, now these cities are connected and their respective values increase. But they're not your cities. And these aren't your roads. Sure, that was a lovely, civic-minded act on your part, but how do you earn points?

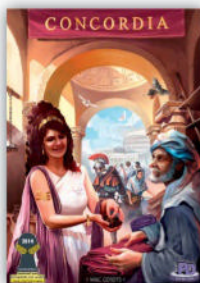
And here, in this apparent ambiguity, is where the fig-like juiciness of *Autobahn*'s sweet centre finally reveals itself. Every time you build or upgrade a stretch of motorway, you get to place one of your managers in the company of the matching colour. They sit on that company's board, and, at the end of each era, you earn a share of that company's profits proportionate to how many you have.

But other players can invest in that



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Board
- ▶ 2 Administration boards
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 6 Delivery boards
- ▶ 69 Cards
- ▶ 289 Tokens
- ▶ 100 Employee tokens
- ▶ 32 Petrol station tokens
- ▶ 8 Trucks
- ▶ 4 Development trackers
- ▶ 16 Goods tokens
- ▶ Solo board
- ▶ 8 Solo mode cards



road network too, and since there's only so many managers a company can have, eventually an incoming manager will bump the oldest out. But they're not sacked – no, they're kicked upstairs, promoted to senior management. This, finally, is how you earn points. All your promoted employees score you points at the end of the game, but by unlocking specific upgrades on your player board, you're able to promote them further along specific tracks, where they'll earn you extra points for – for example – every service station you built, or for how much money you end the game with. No matter how well you contribute by delivering goods and constructing roads, you won't score anything unless you've got execs in the right board rooms.

Autobahn has a lot to take in on a first playthrough – you perform actions by choosing from a hand of cards, only the action isn't on the card, it's on your player board, and it's the *colour* of your card that matters. Only some cards have additional actions on, and you can upgrade both the cards and the action spaces you assign them to. Then you can upgrade

your player board, there's a whole pick-up-and-deliver thing going on with your trucks, there's an entirely separate advancement track you can ascend to get extra bonuses... it's by no means intuitive.

But it's really good. When it clicks, and some of the slightly abstracted mechanics start to make sense, you realise that every move matters. Every decision your opponents make alters the transport ecosystem, denying some opportunities while opening up others. There's a continual sense of progress, of plans coming to fruition, and yes, of agony as someone nabs that plum service station spot.

The result is a game that feels deep and alive without – once you twig how the gears mesh – doesn't feel overwhelming. Moving some of the screen-printed trucks can feel a little fiddly and the small player boards and cards don't always serve your turn-to-turn quality of life, but these are nitpicks. *Autobahn* is fun, nuanced, and has an epic historical arc. Not bad for a game about motorways. 🚗

TIM CLARE

PLAY IT? YES

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *CONCORDIA*...

Do you like the card-based action system of *Concordia*? There's a bit of that in *Autobahn*. Do you like connecting hubs of industry and piggybacking off other players' work in *Brass*? *Autobahn* has that in spades. Also you can deliver washing machines to Amsterdam, an experience offered by neither.

GRAN MECCANISIMO

The Da Vinci Code

Designer: Osprey Games | Publisher: Mark Galeotti



A clockpunk RPG set in Renaissance Italy. The idea is so simple it's a wonder there aren't dozens of them. If we boil it down to its most basic ingredients, *Gran Meccanisimo* is a somewhat open sandbox playable across all of Italy but puts most of its attention to Leonardo Da Vinci's hometown of Florence which has flourished thanks to his creations. From



gliders and tanks to automatons and the mysterious *Gran Meccanisimo* itself, the world is changing and players are thrust into dangerous new stories that range from somewhat straight-faced historical intrigue to over the top cyberpunk style sticking it to the uomo.

Gran Meccanisimo promotes this range well by providing the GM with everything needed to understand the world and setting, even if they've never cared much for Renaissance Italy. Some readers may find the setting portion of the book a bit dull at parts, especially when it goes out of its way to explain real historical city relationships and events instead of the infinitely more interesting clockwork death machines but it does all come in useful when running a campaign. With information on the last of the Holy Roman Empire, what Venice is up to, the war in Spain, and dozens of Italian cities described and

advice given on how to incorporate them into the world, even a layperson is able to get to the grips without busting out the history books or *Assassins Creed 2*.

Interestingly, especially for a game that seems so interested in



being accurate to the times, *Gran Meccanisimo* essentially holds a big sign saying that players should ignore the biases of the time which is very refreshing to see in a somewhat historical RPG. Women, people of colour, and people of non-Christian religions are explicitly made equal thanks to the new technology and social shifts it has brought with it.

Mechanically, *Gran Meccanisimo* works off of a D6 dice pool with each of your Stats (Mind, Body, and Soul) having a base value and each Skill, Trait, or even Gear having a number of dice associated with it. Much like *Vampire The Masquerade* but with a lot more freedom to determine what your Skills are. So instead of *VTM*'s Computer skill, you might say your dashing venetian spy has the Find An Opening skill, which you just make up and define whenever you try to use it. That skill could then be interpreted as finding an opening in a fight or a conversation and depending on what stat you put it under, that helps to

flavour how your character does it. Under Mind, it may be through a keen eye or charm; under Body it likely means with some force or physicality, while Soul may involve a little bit of luck or divine interference.

Thanks to this open and story focused skill system, characters are somewhat capable from the get-go which skips that whole first level slog that many RPGs are



mired in. To help offset this worry, it is worth knowing that players are encouraged to put forth how their Traits may hinder them in a scene as a way to gain advancements at the end of the session. In play, this created some amazing moments as players were awarded for taking risks, making mistakes, and adding to the difficulty or tension of a scene rather than just trying to find the optimal solution.

Setting wise, *Gran Meccanisimo* is sometimes dry but surprisingly easy to understand and run with plot hooks and characters erupting out of the world like water from a freshly hacked clock-lock but where it truly shines is its system which can easily be adapted to any setting. 🍷

AUTHOR?????

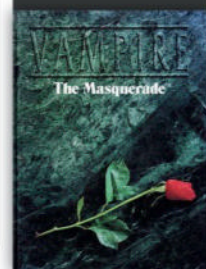
PLAY IT? YES

If you like chucking lots of dice and wish Leonardo Da Vinci's inventions had worked then this is the game for you.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE

Both games put a focus on player individuality and the dangerous politics between mysterious powers.





MISTS OVER CARCASSONNE

Not a mist-step at all

Designer: Klaus-Jürgen Wrede | **Publisher:** Hans im Glück



Carcassonne is a staple of the hobby, an entry point, a way in for many gamers. It's got the frisson of conflict, being a bit sneaky by working your way into a larger castle having done almost none of the work, and the gentle points-be-damned creation of a weird map. Kids love it, drunk people love it, and most people between. It has a ton of expansions – too many to use all at once we'd say, as we've tried it. When you get into the third hour of the expansion-based bloat of your own making (no one said you needed to use towers and dragons, that's on you) you might ask – what if there was something simpler? A refined *Carcassonne* that doesn't feel like it's missing something, now that we've become accustomed to the tweaks of the expansions?

The answer might just be *Mists Over Carcassonne*. A fully standalone

game that asks players to work together, rather than jostle for castle-extensions. A thick mist creeps over the fields of Carcassonne – the spirits of the Cathars are risen as ghosts in retribution for being hunted during the crusades. Apparently anyway, I hadn't checked this surprisingly metal backstory featured on the back of the box until sitting down to write the review. Regardless, the mist is coming to consume all, and with it comes some extremely cute ghost meeples.

Each turn players are going to be drawing a tile and placing it as you would in any game of *Carcassonne*, but some of these tiles contain the aforementioned mist. Whenever a mist tile is placed, you add the number of ghosts printed on it to the tile (minus one if you're adding it to mist that is already in play). If you can't add the number of ghosts you need to the tile you've just placed

it's over for you – and everyone else around the table.

Don't worry though, you are medieval ghostbusters after all – even down to your very meeples, which now carry a 'torch'. Mist works just like creating a classic castle – complete it, and everything inside is returned to the supply. If you capture all the ghosts, they return to whence they came (probably just to pop up again in a moment). The other way to remove ghosts is to score points – each time you complete a road or a castle you can choose to take the points or remove a couple of spooks.

Laying tiles is much the same – although you can place mist tiles in a way that doesn't 'work' (i.e. into the side of a castle, or sharply against a field), although the downside is it's more difficult to remove any ghosts to place to a tile like this. Because you're now working together you can discuss

your tile placements and strings of moves you want to take together. This can lead to a little bit of a 'alpha gamer' problem – where one player takes over for everyone, although that's often a problem in cooperative games anyway.

Importantly the scoring is the same, which means if you share a castle between two players, you both get the points. Working together on larger structures is the way to win big points, and to our group felt like original unspoken aims of the game – that initial draw into *Carcassonne* at all is this childish urge to make a really big castle.

The balance of the game then comes from doing your best collaborative building, and not getting overwhelmed by bringing too many ghosts on to the board. It's surprisingly difficult past the first level. There's six of these in total, each adding a new twist on the basic formula. These include a kind of tile-timer, where you have to make a certain number of points before the first pile runs

out, and adding castles and graveyards. Castles are a point scoring opportunity, and graveyards force you to bury one of your meeples there when four sides of the tile are closed off. This meeple is taken from elsewhere on the board, making it quite a dangerous move to fill in these tile spaces around a cemetery. Hounds will help you later in the game, where they can remove ghosts from tiles adjacent to a meeple on the board. Later the effects of cemeteries will change further adding even more devious ghost-generating rules for players to work around.

So it's a difficult cooperative tile-laying game, but is it *Carcassonne*? The answer is mostly 'sort of' – without the competitive elements the very nature of the game is changed, and the motives for all of your actions are tweaked. It's in no way bad, and it's exactly what cooperative *Carcassonne* should feel like, but there's definitely some of the friction missing. Instead of the delicious

anticipation of playing your slightly evil moves, you'll be chatting about

the group's plans for the game. This sometimes leads to working out that you've lost it in three turns time, which can be a let down.

But this is a little unfair. It's not just cooperative *Carcassonne*, it is its own game entirely. We often like to recommend smaller, contained games a bit like the classic – and this is just like one of those. A little like *Streets*, *Mists Over Carcassonne* brings a compact version of the classic to a table. And if you like the game a lot, but would like to play with more confrontation-adverse players, *Mists* is the ideal place for that. You still have the puzzle of building out the board with your tiles, but the collaboration is one of mitigating the swarm of ghosts. It's quite an anxiety driven game, where drawing the wrong tile can mean the end of everything – or rather, you'll have to play something that's damage limiting rather than a winning move.

Mists Over Carcassonne is a great addition to those who love the base game, and a great way to introduce different kinds of players into the *Carcassonne*. Gather a few friends to bust a few ghosts together. ●

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 60 Tiles (including ghosts)
- ▶ 45 Meeples
- ▶ Starting tile
- ▶ Score board
- ▶ Hound and victory tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CARCASSONE

This might be a little bit obvious, but if you like the original game – and would maybe like to try a new twist on the classic, without the sprawl, then *Mists Over Carcassonne* is a wonderful place to start.



PLAY IT? YES

A great reworking of the classic formula that, we hope, expands in the same way a normal game of *Carcassonne* sprawls. A great starting place for those who really don't like the conflict that comes from the main game.



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PAINTING GUIDE



STAR WARS LEGION: THE MANDALORIAN, GROGU & BOBA FETT

In our last painting guide for the magazine, a bounty (hunter) of Star Wars tips and tricks

Words and photographs by **Andy Leighton**

PAINTS & TECHNIQUES

» Abaddon Black	» Drakenhof	» Leadbelcher	» Sybarite Green
» Agrax	» Nightshade	» Loren Forest	» Sycorax Bronze
» Earthshade	» Emperor's	» Lothorn Blue	» Tallarn Sand
» Alaitoc Blue	» Children	» Mourmfang	» Tau Light Ochre
» Astrogranite	» Eshin Grey	» Nuln Oil	» Temple Guard
» Debris	» Evil Sunz Scarlet	» Orruk Flesh	» Blue
» Averland Sunset	» Fennisian Grey	» Pallid Wyck	» Thondia Brown
» Baharroth Blue	» Played One	» Flesh	» Thunderhawk
» Cadian	» Flesh	» Phalanx Yellow	» Blue
» Flestone	» Fulgrim Pink	» Rakarth Flesh	» Ulthuan Grey
» Caledor Sky	» Gauss Blaster	» Rhinox Hide	» Ushabti Bone
» Caliban Green	» Green	» Russ Grey	» Waaagh! Flesh
» Canoptek Alloy	» Incubi Darkness	» Skarsnik Green	» Wazdakka Red
» Celestra Grey	» Ironbreaker	» Skrag Brown	» White Scar
» Corax Black	» Kantor Blue	» Sotek Green	» Wild Rider Red
» Dark Reaper	» Karak Stone	» Steel Legion	» XV-88
» Dawnstone	» Khorne Red	» Drab	» Zamesi Desert
» Deathclaw	» Kislev Flesh	» Stormhost	» Zandri Dust
» Brown	» Knight-questor	» Silver	
» Doornbull Brown	» Flesh		

Each model is split up into 4 stages, each with a list of colours and the corresponding paint that was used for it. Each stage uses a different technique to achieve a similar effect on each element but with different colours. Normally we would start with an undercoat using a spray but these minis come primed and ready to paint.

Stage 1 is basecoating. Base colours are applied using flat, solid colours covering an area completely. Sometimes this can take 2-3 coats to achieve that flat, solid colour. Make sure to apply several thin coats, rather than one thick coat.

Stage 2 is layering. This stage involves applying a layer of a lighter colour, leaving the recesses, such as the folds in cloth, the darker basecoat colour. Sometimes we will apply a thinned layer. This involves adding a thinner, most commonly water or Lahmian Medium, to the paint. This is then applied over several coats, gradually building a gradient between the basecoat and the layer.

Stage 3 is highlighting. We use several methods to highlight, including a layered highlight, line and edge. A layered highlight is very similar to the thinned layer, but is only applied to the

raised areas and edges. A line highlight involves applying a thin line of paint to the raised areas and straight edges of the area. An edge highlight is very similar, except that it is only applied to the hard edges.

Stage 4 is for final details and highlights. This stage involves adding the finishing touches, sometimes just small details like the eyes, or adding small highlights to increase definition.

If you find yourself unsure of where to apply the highlights or spot highlights, look over the images alongside the guide and compare that stage to the last.

DIN DJARIN

DIN DJARIN STARTING ARMOUR

STAGE 1

Incubi Darkness: Apply a basecoat to the undersuit and cloak.

Karak Stone: Apply a basecoat to the hand armour; chest under armour; right thigh armour and boots.

Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat to the remaining armour and straps.

Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the helmet, shoulder and gun.

Skrag Brown: Apply a basecoat to the boot wrap.

Kantor Blue: Apply a basecoat to the arrows on the hand armour.



STAGE 2

Dark Reaper: Apply a layer to the undersuit and cloak.

Flayed One Flesh: Apply a layer to the hand armour; chest under armour and right thigh armour.

Doombull Brown: Apply a layer to the remaining armour.

Mournfang Brown: Apply a layer to the straps.

Drakenhof Nightshade: Apply a shade to the helmet, shoulder and gun.

Deathclaw Brown: Apply a basecoat to the boot wrap.

Alaitoc Blue: Apply a layer to the arrows on the hand armour.

Nuln Oil: Apply a shade to the boots.



DIN DJARIN TRUE METALLIC METALS(TMM)

STAGE 1

Ironbreaker: Apply a basecoat to the armour and gun.

Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat to the undersuit, boots and straps.

Thondia Brown: Apply a basecoat to the cloak.

Karak Stone: Apply a basecoat to the hand armour.

Caledor Sky: Apply a basecoat to the arrows on the hand armour.

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a basecoat to the fingers of the gloves.

Eshin Grey: Apply a basecoat to the stomach armour.



STAGE 2

Nuln Oil: Apply a shade to the armour.

Doombull Brown: Apply a thinned layer to the bodysuit and boots.

Mournfang Brown: Apply a layer to the straps.

Dark Reaper: Apply a layer to the cloak.

Rakarath Flesh: Apply a layer to the hand armour.

Lothorn Blue: Apply a layer to the arrows on the hand armour.

Averland Sunset: Apply a layer to the fingers of the gloves.

Dawnstone: Apply a layer to the stomach armour.



DIN DJARIN NON METALLIC METALS(NMM)

STAGE 1

Dark Reaper: Apply a basecoat to the armour and gun.

Rhinox Hide: Apply a basecoat to the undersuit, boots and straps.

Thondia Brown: Apply a basecoat to the cloak.

Karak Stone: Apply a basecoat to the hand armour.

Kantor Blue: Apply a basecoat to the arrows on the hand armour.

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a basecoat to the fingers of the gloves.



STAGE 2

Russ Grey: Apply a line highlight to the hard edges of the armour, followed by thinned layer from the top down.

Doombull Brown: Apply a thinned layer to the bodysuit.

Mournfang Brown: Apply a layer to the straps and boots.

Dark Reaper: Apply a layer to the cloak.

Rakarath Flesh: Apply a layer to the hand armour.

Lothorn Blue: Apply a layer to the arrows on the hand armour.

Averland Sunset: Apply a layer to the fingers of the gloves.

Dawnstone: Apply a layer to the stomach armour.



STAGE 3

Russ Grey: Apply a line highlight to the undersuit and cloak.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a line highlight to the hand armour, chest under armour and right thigh armour.
Skrag Brown: Apply a line highlight to the remaining armour.
Steel Legion Drab: Apply a line highlight to the straps.
Ironbreaker: Apply a layer to the helmet, shoulder and gun.
Tau Light Ochre: Apply a layer to the fingertips.
Lothorn Blue: Apply a line highlight to the arrows on the hand armour.
Karak Stone: Apply a layer to the boots.



STAGE 4

Fenrisian Grey: Apply a spot highlight to the undersuit and cloak.
Ironbreaker/Skrag Brown: Apply small chips with Ironbreaker and apply a small line highlight of Skrag Brown beneath them.
Karak Stone: Apply a spot highlight to the straps.
Stormhost Silver: Apply a spot to the helmet, shoulder and gun.
Zandri Dust: Apply a layer to the fingertips.
Played One Flesh: Apply a line highlight to the boots.



STAGE 3

Drakenhof Nightshade: Apply a shade to the armour.
Deathclaw Brown: Apply a line highlight to the bodysuit.
Steel Legion Drab: Apply a line highlight to the straps and boots.
Thunderhawk Blue: Apply a line highlight to the cloak.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a line highlight to the hand armour.
Baharroth Blue: Apply a line highlight to the arrows on the hand armour.
Zamesi Desert: Apply a spot highlight to the fingers of the gloves.
Celestra Grey: Apply a line highlight to the stomach armour.



STAGE 4

Iron breaker: Apply a layer to the armour.
Agrax Earthshade: Apply a shade to the bodysuit.
Karak Stone: Apply a spot highlight to the straps and boots.
Dawnstone: Apply a spot highlight to the cloak.



STAGE 3

Celestra Grey: Apply a line highlight and a thinned layer to the armour.
Steel Legion Drab: Apply a line highlight to the bodysuit, straps and boots.
Thunderhawk Blue: Apply a line highlight to the cloak.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a line highlight to the hand armour.
Baharroth Blue: Apply a line highlight to the arrows on the hand armour.
Zamesi Desert: Apply a spot highlight to the fingers of the gloves.
Celestra Grey: Apply a line highlight to the stomach armour.



STAGE 4

Ulthuan Grey: Apply a line highlight to the armour.
Agrax Earthshade: Apply a shade to the bodysuit.
Karak Stone: Apply a spot highlight to the straps and boots.
Dawnstone: Apply a spot highlight to the cloak.



GROGU, BOBA FETT & BASING

GROGU

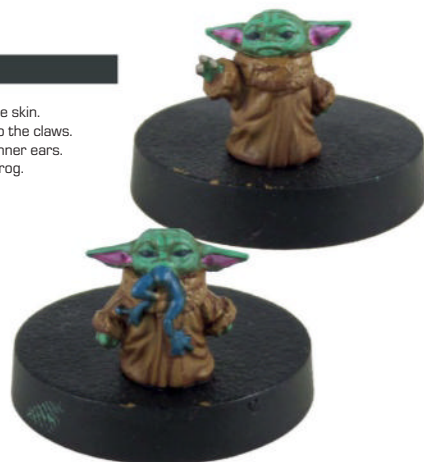
STAGE 1

Mournfang Brown: Apply a basecoat to the robes.
Loren Forest: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Abaddon Black: Apply a basecoat to the eyes.
Emperor's Children: Apply a thinned layer in the ears.
Caliban Green: Apply a basecoat to the frog.



STAGE 2

XV-88: Apply a layer to the robes.
Sybarite Green: Apply a layer to the skin.
Rakarth Flesh: Apply a basecoat to the claws.
Fulgrim Pink: Apply a layer to the inner ears.
Sotek Green: Apply a layer to the frog.



BOBA FETT DAIMYO

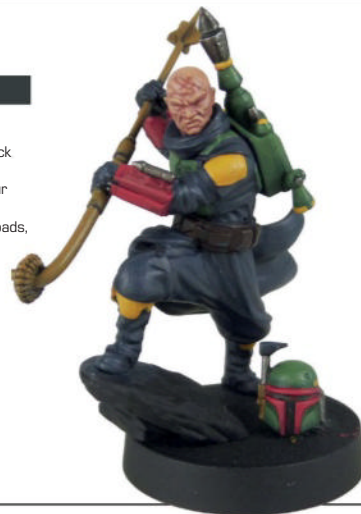
STAGE 1

Incubi Darkness: Apply a basecoat to the undersuit and tabard.
Waaagh! Flesh: Apply a basecoat to the armour, jetpack and helmet.
Khorne Red: Apply a basecoat wrist armour and helmet visor trim.
Tau Light Ochre: Apply a basecoat to the shoulder pads, knee guards and jetpack/helmet detailing.
Rhinox Hide: Apply a base coat to the gaderffii stick and belt.
Knight-questor Flesh: Apply a basecoat to the skin.
Leadbelcher: Apply a basecoat to the metals.



STAGE 2

Dark Reaper: Apply a layer to the bodysuit and tabards.
Loren Forest: Apply a layer to the armour, jetpack and helmet.
Wazdakka Red: Apply a layer to the wrist armour and helmet visor rim.
Averland Sunset: Apply a layer to the shoulder pads, knee guards and jetpack/helmet detailing.
XV-88: Apply a layer to the gaderffii stick.
Doombull Brown: Apply a layer to the belt.
Cadian Fleshtone: Apply a layer to the skin.
Nuln Oil: Apply a shade to the metals.



BASING - NAVARRO



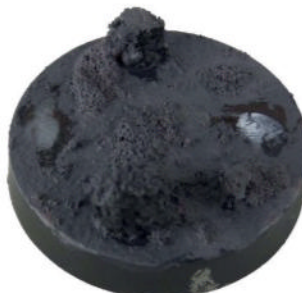
STAGE 1

Cork: Use a small amount of superglue to add some 2mm cork to the base.



STAGE 2

Corax Black: Apply a basecoat over the cork.



STAGE 3

Astrogranite Debris: Apply a layer over the base and cork.



STAGE 4

Eshin Grey: Apply a basecoat to the whole base.

STAGE 3

Zandri Dust: Apply a line highlight to the robes.
Skarsnik Green: Apply a line highlight to the skin.
White Scar: Apply a spot highlight to the eyes.
Temple Guard Blue: Apply a line highlight to the frog.



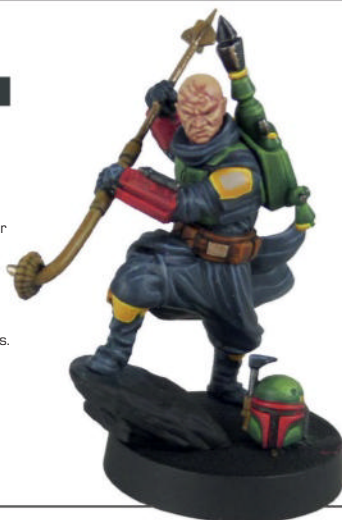
STAGE 4

Ushatti Bone: Apply a spot highlight to the robes.
Gauss Blaster Green: Apply a spot highlight to the skin.
Lothorn Blue: Apply a spot highlight to the frog.



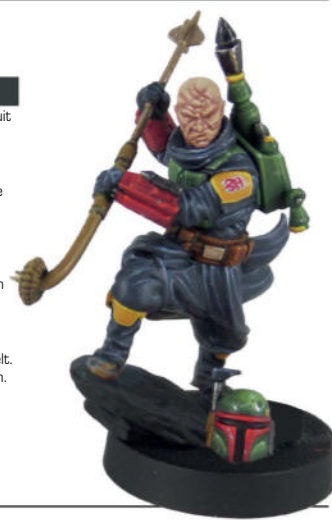
STAGE 3

Russ Grey: Apply a thinned layer to the bodysuit and tabards.
Orruk Flesh: Apply a line highlight to the armour, jetpack and helmet.
Evil Sunz Scarlet: Apply a line highlight to the wrist armour and helmet visor rim.
Phalanx Yellow: Apply a line highlight to the shoulder pads, knee guards and jetpack/helmet detailing.
Rakarath Flesh: Apply a box onto the shoulder pad.
Tallarn Sand: Apply a layer to the gaderffii stick.
Skrag Brown: Apply a line highlight to the belt.
Kislev Flesh: Apply a layer to the skin.
Drakenhof Nightshade: Apply a shade to the metals.
Sycorax Bronze: Apply a basecoat to the gaderffii stick end, belt buckle and rocket supports.



STAGE 4

Fenrisian Grey: Apply a line highlight to the bodysuit and tabards.
Leadbelcher: Apply dashes to the armour, jetpack and helmet to create chips.
Gauss Blaster Green: Apply a spot highlight to the top of the armour, helmet and jetpack, and a line highlight below the chips.
Pallid Wych Flesh: Apply a layer to the box on the shoulder pad.
Wazdakka Red: Apply the symbol within the box on the shoulder pad.
Wild Rider Red: Apply a spot highlight to the wrist armour and helmet visor rim.
Deathclaw Brown: Apply a spot highlight to the belt.
Flayed One Flesh: Apply a spot highlight to the skin.
Ironbreaker: Apply a spot highlight to the metals.
Canoptek Alloy: Apply a layer to the gaderffii stick end, belt buckle and rocket supports.



STAGE 5

Steel Legion Drab: Make a mix with around 5 parts water and apply as a glaze across the base.



STAGE 6

Celestra Grey: Apply a drybrush.



STAGE 7

Ulthuan Grey: Apply a light drybrush.



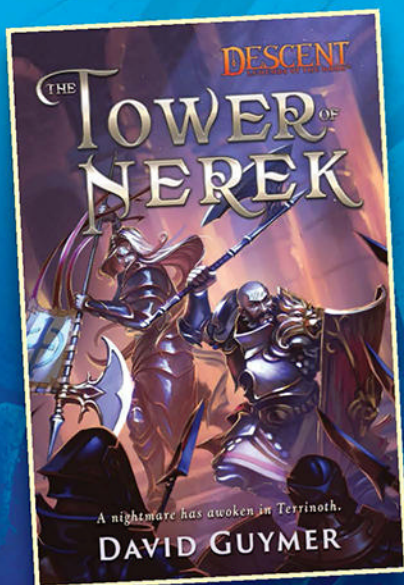
STAGE 8

Abaddon Black: Apply a layer to the base rim.
Gale Force 9 Winter Static Grass: Use PVA to apply small patches.

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THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

TIPS FOR A NEW GM



Just getting started with running roleplaying games? Here's our tips to kick things off

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**
Artwork from **Dragonbane** courtesy of
Free League

Sitting down to run your first campaign game can be an intimidating prospect. One moment you're safely surrounded by a fortress of rulebooks, maps, and notes, and the next you look up to see a half-dozen people on the other side of the table with expectant faces and unfinished character sheets.

If you ever find yourself in this position, you can take comfort in the fact that almost all of the anxiety and stress will melt away once the fireballs are flying and the dice are clattering. However, there are still a few common areas where newer GMs can slip up, run into walls, or just find that things aren't working quite the way they want them to.

There's no shame in this. GMing can be a tough gig. I know that I made a lot of mistakes in my early games and that I'm probably still making a few of them now. There are lots of things I wish I'd known when I made my first trip behind the GM's screen.

Here are a few of them.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ORIGINAL

Unless you're live-streaming your campaign to a particularly judgmental audience, nobody is going to complain that there are dragons in your fantasy game, that the mega-corps in your cyberpunk game are wildly corrupt, or that the cultists from your horror game are conjuring up tentacled abominations.

Tropes are often tropes for a good reason. They let players find their footing in your shared imagination and lubricate the roleplay by allowing them to focus on the big beats rather than getting hung up on details. If you end up running a game where a grumpy dwarf, an aloof elf, and a no-nonsense human with a mysterious destiny team up to battle the cackling Dark Lord, who cares? So long as everyone is having a good time, what's the harm?

In truth, most of the time, the originality

and spark of your story emerge from the players and the dice rolls rather than any contrived set-up. Give it time, and the creativity will shine through from even the tropiest beginnings.

NOT EVERY CAMPAIGN NEEDS TO BE EPIC

In the same way that not every setting needs to be completely original, not every campaign needs to be a multi-year extravaganza that uses every monster, spell and location in the core rulebook.

When you kick off your GMing career, there's nothing wrong with keeping things fairly limited in scope. Indeed, I've often found that things work much better when the party begins their adventure with a well-defined, clearly visible goal in sight, rather than chasing after plotlines that won't be resolved 'til the mid-2030s.

This doesn't mean that you aren't allowed to have grand plans, of course. Rather, you shouldn't feel forced to make things world-spanning for the sake of it. Plenty of successful games begin with a quest that only lasts a half-dozen sessions, but then branches out organically as the party grows in both power and fame.

YOU'RE ALLOWED TO SAY NO

We all want people to enjoy our games, right? So that means we shouldn't say no to them, right?

Not exactly.

Trying to work with your players rather than against them is a worthy goal, and there's a reason that "yes, and..." is a staple of improvisation. However, trying to be an all-accepting yes-man of a GM is a lot like trying to be a cool parent – the kind that desperately wants their kids to like them, but ultimately makes everyone rather embarrassed and miserable.

Sometimes we just need to say no to things. This could be a character choice that just doesn't gel with the campaign everyone agreed to ("No, you can't play a robot in our gritty fantasy game"), an attempt to bend the rules of the game ("No, drinking mouthwash does not grant you XP for millions of bacteria"), or a move that would ruin the fun for other players ("No, you can't force us to sit through a graphic torture scene just because you want to be aggressively edgy").

For some things, you can fall back on the edgy twin of "yes, and...", which is "no, but..." – maybe they can't be a robot, but they might be able to play as a more genre-appropriate arcane

construct. However, there are some areas where you should feel totally justified in the hard no, such as when you think something would mess with player safety and comfort.

Speaking of which...

SESSION ZERO IS REALLY IMPORTANT

If you've never encountered the term before, session zero is a meet-up you have before the campaign kicks off, where the entire group can agree on everything from character options to who pays for pizza.

I know that it sounds like a monumental waste of time – who wants to be discussing the merits of point-buy vs roll-in-order when you could actually be playing the game? However, it's well worth spending a couple of hours up-front to avoid the entire campaign collapsing a few weeks down the line because half the party was expecting a gritty dungeon crawl, and half the party wants a low-combat roleplay-fest.

A session zero is a great way to iron out these kinks before everybody sets their heart on a particular playstyle, and can often help you to find a compromise solution.

Beyond this, it's a great place to take care of the practical side of things. You can work out how often you're going to play, whether you skip sessions if a player can't make it, and if people need to bring their own minis or if they can represent their character with a fancy die. Scheduling clashes have killed off more campaigns than max-damage fireballs, and you'll never get a better chance to tackle them than a session zero.

THE BEST CAMPAIGN IS THE ONE YOU ACTUALLY PLAY

If you hang around RPG conventions and lurk on the right Reddit boards, you find a lot of people complaining that they would love to run a campaign they've been dreaming up, but they haven't been able to get the game running yet. Often, you end up having these same conversations with the same people year after year after year.

Running an RPG campaign is scary. Sometimes it can be hard. Often, it can be frustrating. However, when things are running smoothly, GMing a group of excited, dedicated adventurers can be one of the greatest feelings in the world.

If you find yourself teetering on the edge of a campaign, unsure about whether to make the leap, go for it. You never know where it will take you. 🍕



SHOP SPOTLIGHT

D20 BOARD GAME CAFE

We chat to Michelle, Mario and Page about setting up a gaming store with your friends, and everything that comes after

Interview by **Christopher John Eggett**

Tell us a little bit about how the store got started?

Michelle (she/her), Mario (he/him) and I (Page she/they) were already good friends and gamer buddies so starting a board game business together seemed like the natural next step. Michelle always says she was sick of Mario's games overtaking the living room so she opened a cafe for the storage.

The three of us went to visit a couple of the few Board Game Cafes that were around back in 2016 and decided that we wanted to bring this to our towns. I live in Watford so I pushed for it to be here but we finally opened a second cafe in Uxbridge closer to Michelle and Mario, so we're both happy. Admittedly we had very little experience in hospitality and business but we took that big leap and with a lot of hard work and passion, it worked out for us in the end.

What's it like being a FLGS in your area?

Watford is my home town and I love it here, so for me it was just the right place for a cafe. There is such a great sense of community here with a varied and interesting high street. There are many independent business and plenty of support for those business in the area. Within a 10-minute walk you can find rock climbing, escape rooms, gaming bars and a plethora of delicious eateries.

We're still finding out our way in Uxbridge but so far the community has been warm and welcoming. There are two big shopping centres right next to us as well as a very tasty Indian right across the road. The street we are on is very quaint and is full of small independent businesses is, we certainly feel like we made the right call opening our second.

What do you think makes your store unique?

Having visited many Board Game Cafes we have seen first-hand how unique they all are and that's part of why we love this industry. For us, d20 exemplifies the "friendly local game store" vibe. We like to think we've kept that local feel where you get to know the people behind the bar. We have some amazing staff who are super friendly and knowledgeable, they are always ready to teach games. We like to think we've found the perfect balance between being the Board Game Cafe for the average person who wants to pop in for a family day out, as well as providing for the hobbyist who are well versed in tabletop games.

Alongside this we have an extensive menu of scrumptious hot food, local beers, homemade cakes and deluxe shakes! Eating gluten free or vegan is not a chore here either, we try to cater for everyone. Most importantly we pride ourselves on being inclusive and a safe space for all. We feel our cafe has become known for being LGBTQIA+ friendly, as well as being accessible and chest-feeding friendly. Our main ethos has always been to make sure d20 is for everyone.

What events do you run for the local gaming scene?

d20 is all about its communities. We love our card games such as Marvel Champions and Pokémon. We even still have a pretty active *Keyforge* community even though the game has been out of print for a long time, we're anxiously awaiting its return. Both our cafes are Konami stores for *Yu-Gi-Oh* and Wizards Play Network store for *Magic: The Gathering*, with our Watford cafe being winning Premium WPN store.



We also have our Open Gaming community who are just incredible. It's an event for people looking for gamer buddies where you can come along by yourself or with friends and we'll match you up with people to play games with, it's a great way to meet people. We love seeing people come to those events as strangers and leave as friends.

What are your plans for the future?

In 2020 we had great plans for expansion, however covid had other ideas for us! We thankfully survived the pandemic and opened our second cafe this year. The plan was to then open a third in Aylesbury, however now it's the cost of living crisis that has made us new plans. We've had to hold off on that third cafe which was a little bit heart-breaking for us. Our hope for 2023 is just to survive the severe price hikes in food, drink and energy. We have to admit it's hit us quite hard.

However, we have not put cafe three on permanent hold, we are still holding out for it. The dream is still alive. We hope to open in either Aylesbury or North Herts in the next couple of years, and then who knows. 🍀

WHERE CAN I FIND IT?

D20 Board Game Cafe
87 Queens Road, Watford
WD17 2QN
www.d20cafe.co.uk

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ALQUERQUE

The name Alquerque is of Arabic origin and may be loosely translated as 'the Game of Stones', where (as so often in games history) 'stones' indicates playing-pieces.

It's a rather boring game if you follow just the earliest rules that have come down to us, as they are clearly incomplete, but its chief interest lies in its position as the ancestor of Draughts or Checkers.

The earliest known description is that contained in *El Libro de Juegos* commissioned by Alfonso the Wise of Spain in 1283. (It is mentioned, but not described, in a work of the 10th century.) Each of two players has a complement of 12 stones arranged on the points of a board of $5 \times 5 = 25$ points as shown in the diagram, here reproduced from Alfonso's book, the central point being empty. The aim is to capture all your opponent's pieces. Each in turn moves a piece along a line to a vacant neighbouring point, so the first player has only three options. Thereafter you either similarly move a piece along a line or capture an opposing piece by jumping over it to land on the vacant point beyond – exactly as in Draughts, but playing always on the points and not the fields between. Thus the second player can only proceed by capturing the first-moved piece, again in only one way. Later, multiple captures are allowed, in that a piece that has made a single capture may make another consecutively if possible. Captures are compulsory, under penalty of the huff.

As every commentator has subsequently pointed out, these rules do leave many questions unanswered. Most modern players follow additional rules proposed by R C Bell in volume One of *Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations* (1962), namely that you cannot move backwards, nor to a point it has already occupied, and that on reaching the back line of points you can only move by capturing (necessarily backwards). Even these rules do not greatly increase the interest of the play, and, as Alfonso says, the result is often a draw.

The Dutch games historian Arie van der Stoep argues (for example in *Draughts in Relation to Chess and Alquerque*, 2007) that Alquerque as described above is incomplete without allowing a piece that



reaches the back row to promote to the equivalent of a king in Draughts, with consequent additional powers, such as its 'long' move in Continental Draughts. A king, of course, nowadays indicated by placing one disc atop another, would need to be represented by doubling a piece up and moving it as a pair of twins. The absence of a promotion rule in Alfonso need not be taken as 'evidence of absence' in fact; and the truth of the matter is surely that various different rules were experimented with, adopted and modified in different times and places.

Although the evolution of Draughts itself is a highly debatable field of study, nobody now doubts that the game arose in mediaeval Europe as the result of adapting Alquerque to be played on the chequered board of Chess, and the very fact that there are so many varieties of Draughts probably reflects an equal variety of rules for its direct ancestor Alquerque. ♠

ABOVE Alquerque as illustrated in *El Libro de Juegos*

David Parlett is a games inventor and historian, author of *The Oxford History of Card Games* and its sequel on board games, and a visiting professor of games design at the University of Suffolk.



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